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OUT OF HER SPHERE.

BY

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"FROM THISTLES—GRAPES," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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OUT OF HER SPHERE.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE FORT.

MRS. THORNTON arrived at the Fort in little over three quarters of an hour after she had left her house. She was tired with the heat of the day, and glad that she was likely to have a little time to herself before Audley Dale made his appearance. She entered the Fort, first looking round to see if he were within sight or not, but there was no one near but a shrimper going out with his nets, who stared curiously at her, with a faint, vacant wonder as to the cause that had

brought a lady out alone so far from the town.

She went in through the old dismantled portal, and decided upon going at once up the stairs, old and crumbling as they were. The lower part of the Fort was still so wet that it afforded but an unpleasant standing for any one lightly shod. On the storey above it would at least be dry, and she might see Audley coming. Gathering her skirts carefully round her, she prepared to mount the stairs, and did so, complaining a little to herself of the difficulty she found in the ascent. Perhaps if she had considered all these disagreeables before she started, she might have found another trysting place. The chance of tearing her dress, and soiling her skirts, might have kept her away from the Fort if no other consideration would have done so.

But as she was there, she resolved, after her usual philosophy, to make the best

of it, and accordingly ascended the stairs that wound their way through the crumbling walls, taking care to sustain as little detriment as she could help, and at last found herself on the first floor of the Fort, and resolved that that should content her. "There's no view worth going a step further for," she said ; "indeed, I always do wonder what makes people think so much of scenery as to go through what they do for the sake of seeing it. Now, where shall I sit down ? I think that window-seat will do. If only it was not so covered with dirt."

She had taken the precaution of bringing a spare handkerchief with her, and this she laid on what she called a window-seat. Below the narrow slit, that in former ages had served as an out-look from which to survey the coast, some of the stones had crumbled away, and thus some kind of resting place was formed in the thickness of

the wall,—not an uncomfortable one for a time,—and here Mrs. Thornton placed herself to await Audley Dale.

She had her hair to arrange, which the sea breeze had slightly ruffled, and her hat to place yet more becomingly on her head; her dress to adjust, and her gloves to draw on still more tightly, so that not the slightest crease should be visible in their surfaces. All this took time, so that it was at least a quarter of an hour before it occurred to her that it was time Audley made his appearance, and she began to look out for him.

Ten minutes more went by, and she was growing impatient. “He ought not to keep me waiting like this; it’s hardly civil,” she said with a little irritation. “If I were not so tired, I think I’d go back at once. Something may have kept him though,” she added, her usual good temper asserting itself; “but this is a

terribly dull place to sit in ; I wonder if people ever did live here, and if so, how they bore their lives. Good gracious ! I should think there must have been times when they envied the very limpets on the rocks !”

From the window where she sat she could see the Denes stretching along in their monotony, and the low, poor land beyond, where nothing but the poorest, coarsest grass grew for miles. It was not easy to see persons approaching from the town, until they were quite near the Fort, but she had expected that the sound of Audley Dale’s horse’s hoofs would reach her as she sat, and was surprised to hear a step below, and yet, looking down, see nothing of the horse.

“ I wonder where he has tethered him ; or he may have walked ; he surely never can have been so imprudent as to have brought

a groom with him—but then I *must* have heard the horses.”

The step was ascending the stairs ; a slow heavy one—not at all the step of a man hurrying to keep an appointment upon which much of the happiness of his future life depends. “ I do n’t believe it *is* Audley,” she said ; “ it’s too bad of him to keep me like this, and expose me to the chance of being stared at by any one who may chance to come.”

She looked out of the loophole ; she was sure it was not Audley, whose step was coming every second nearer. She would not be seen sitting there as if she expected to meet some one, but rather as if she had ascended on account of the view ; she kept her face obstinately turned away ; she was sure the steps that were now coming nearer and nearer to her, were not Audley’s ; some visitor to Wearmouth, most probably, who thought the Fort one of the local lions ; he

would most likely soon go, and, if she kept her face turned from him, never be able to recognize her if he met her in the town. But what was he now standing still for, as if he were taking an inventory of every stone in the old walls? She only hoped he would n't speak, but if she had to answer him, it should still be with her face turned from him.

The man was coming nearer. Had he an especial fancy to the point of view from the loophole by which she sat? Nearer still—it was insufferably rude; nearer still—she felt him touching her. She was as brave as most women, braver than are many, but her courage failed her as she felt him grasp her arm—failed and left her utterly when she looked up and saw her husband's face!

What was it that she read there that made her ready to cry out and fling herself on the ground before him, to implore his

mercy? What was it that made even her light shallow nature quiver and tremble with a dim vague horror of some awful purpose, written in the eyes that looked so pitilessly upon her?

No—not pitilessly—at the second glance, assuredly not that; they were eyes that spoke of judgment and of doom, but still of love, that shuddered at the vengeance it was in its own despite compelled to inflict—eyes, that, under all their sternness, showed a world of anguish that made her feel how hopeless it would be to appeal to him for pity. Did he not pity her, grieve over her, mourn for her?—surely yes. There was the utter hopelessness of it—nothing that she could say, no tears or prayers, would move this man one inch from that, from which his whole nature recoiled with an unspeakable loathing.

She felt *that* instinctively, and yet as instinctively cried out, “Harold!” and seizing

his arm, looked up in his face with a scared, frightened look, "Harold! have you come to take me home? I'll go at once, only for Heaven's sake don't look like that!"

"Come with me!" was all he said in answer, and he moved towards the top of the stairs, looking back as he went, to see that she followed him. She did so, all her usual nerve and self-possession gone, thinking that he was going to take her home, and hoping that Audley Dale would not come there before they left.

"I think he will kill him," she thought, "he looks capable of it. What has brought him here? How did he know that I had come?"

The worn stone stairs were more difficult to descend than they had been to mount; they were so slippery and broken away, that there was danger of falling at every step, and if so, steep and precipitous as the stairs were, any one who lost his footing

might fall at once to the bottom. Harold Thornton went slowly down, turning every now and then, not so much to see that his wife was following, as that she was making the descent in safety. Once when she had nearly fallen, she uttered a little cry, and he looked up almost as if alarmed. "You are not hurt?" he said, with an anxiety that contrasted strangely with the awful purpose she had read in his eyes when she first met them; and he half put out his hand to help, and then withdrew it.

They came to the lower room, and she looked fearfully round to see if Audley was there. The place was vacant—possibly he had seen her husband, and considered it best not to enter the Fort—she hoped so—but if Harold had seen him—if they had met; what—what might have happened? Her heart turned cold within her at the thought; then she looked up at her husband, and tried to speak. He seemed to

know what it was she wanted of him, and made answer,

“I have not met him for whom you are concerned ; you need not have that thought to disquiet you now ; he is safe for me. Do you want to know why I sought you here—followed you from the home that you will never desecrate again ?”

His very lips were white, and the eyes, whose tenderness made them so doubly terrible, were fixed on her with a look from which she shrank and would have turned away, but that it seemed impossible to withdraw herself from them. Then she clung to him, “Harold ! Harold ! speak to me ; what dreadful thing is this that you are dreaming of ?”

He laid his hand on her almost tenderly ; then he said, in a tone that was almost a whisper, and yet more audible than any words of his had ever been, “What should I be thinking of, but how to put an end to

the evil that has been going on so long? What else can I think of but that, when life has become impossible, the sooner death is sought the better—and, Henrietta,”—and his voice now had something of the awful tenderness of his eyes,—“life has become impossible for you and me.”

“Oh, Harold, Harold!” and she cried and sobbed—she was not easily moved to tears, but all her courage had left her now. “What is it that you mean? why should you think such dreadful things of me? I am innocent, I tell you, innocent; I have never wronged you in thought or deed. Won’t you believe me—Harold, dear! come back! come home! You shall have no reason for complaint. Audley Dale shall never enter your house again—and yet I could swear that it was Milly Lisdale brought him there—he never had a thought of me—or at least never any other thought than as a friend!”

He looked at her with a great compassion. "Why should you say such things now? Do you think I do not know, that when a woman has fallen as you have fallen, she will not pause at a lie or two, or even a false oath? How is it possible that I should believe you? Would you not say anything to screen yourself and him?"

She turned angrily away, something of her usual spirit returning. "I'll waste no further words. I'm ashamed of myself for having said so much already."

All the tenderness passed out of his face, and only the hard, inveterate purpose remained. "We won't speak any more of this," he said; "it is only waste of words. Come with me now. You wanted to see this old Fort. I think I can show you a part of it such as you never dreamed of."

She shrank from him. "Where are you going to take me? I'll not move a step while you look at me like that."

“You’ll come with me”—and he placed his arm round her, and she felt herself powerless; let him do what he would, she could not resist him. He led her towards what seemed a recess in the wall—at the first glance looking only as if it were caused by the stones having fallen away—then she found herself on a stair-way, rougher and more worn than that which led to the upper part of the tower, and with only such faint glimmering of light as could make its way through the aperture behind them. What was he going to do with her? Take her down to the dark places beneath the Fort?—she had heard that there were such—and there destroy her. She could no longer question or plead; she was utterly powerless in his hands; he might take her to her doom, and she must only submit to it—what could she do else?

Down the steep stairs, where he had almost to carry her—into a darkness denser

and more terrible than any she had ever known—into air that was damp and cold, as if it breathed of the grave. It was to her grave that he was carrying her! She was so numbed, so paralyzed with fear, that she had almost lost the desire to escape. It seemed as if she could realize nothing but her utter helplessness and his mastery over her. Like a victim spell-bound by the eyes of a rattle-snake, or rather like that round which the cobra is twining its hideous folds—so she felt, knew, saw her danger, and felt, saw, knew nothing else.

They seemed so long descending into this awful darkness, into this chill atmosphere which froze the very soul within her—and yet it was not so long—the steps were not above a dozen that they descended—but to her mind every one seemed trebled. Should they ever come to the end? and, if they did, what was awaiting her there? Still she felt his arm round her, pressing her

closely, but not rudely, to him. Then they stopped at last, and he seemed to lean against the wall, and drew her yet closer to him.

“We will wait here,” he said.

Wait—what did that mean? Had he hired any one to kill her? Was it that for which they were waiting? Then she could almost have smiled at the folly of the thought. Such things were not done now-a-days, or only in melodramas. But what was the meaning of his madness? That it had some awful meaning she felt sure. Presently she roused a little out of the mental torpor into which her despairing fears had sent her, and said, faintly, “Harold—Harold—what is it that we are to wait for?”

“Death,” he said, quietly. “Do n’t you hear it coming?”

Hear it! Was that what he meant—the never-ending dashing of the waves 6

outside. Was that—*that* how he had chosen to revenge himself for his imagined wrongs? She remembered, dimly, now, having heard him speak of some acquaintance with the Fort—of its probable fall before long, owing to the entrance of the sea into some subterranean chamber or passage beneath it. Once, on a rare occasion, when he had given himself a few hours' holiday, he had come with Mr. Rushington to photograph the exterior of the building; and they spoke of some discoveries they had made in the interior, and the likelihood, before long, of the waves levelling the tower to the sands. This—this was what he had brought her there for! Either the waves should come and destroy her before they retired back to their vast bed, or the stones of the old place would fall upon and crush her out of shape, if at last the waters were to do what had been so long expected of them? She roused once more with the

intensity and imminence of her danger, tried passionately to free herself from the grasp that held her so closely, writhed, shrieked and struggled, and the one hoarse, wild cry burst from her—"Murderer!" so fiercely, that its echo sounded up the steep slimy stairs, and out into the open air, so that two fishermen passing, busy with their nets, heard the cry, though the word was too indistinct to be understood, and, looking at each other, almost doubted whether they should leave their work and go into the Fort to see if there was any foul play going on.

But their boats were waiting for them, and they had their bread to earn; the breeze was springing up, and it was time they put out. The cry was not repeated, so they consoled themselves with the thought that it was only some one playing a little too rudely in the old place, and went on, trying to forget that strange, awful cry, and did forget it for a while, till

before long it was brought to their remembrance in such awful sort that they wished they had heeded it better at the time.

The cry was not repeated, for the mouth that uttered it was closed and stopped by kisses—such passionate, despairing kisses as he had given her but last night, when she left him in all her bravery for Audley Dale. She understood the meaning of those desperate kisses now, and for a time she had no voice or strength to cry again, even when he drew his lips from hers.

“You have no right to call me that,” he said. “What else was there for me? What else have you left for me to do? Surely death for both of us is a better thing than the dishonoured, shameful lives we were both leading.”

Again she twisted, and writhed, and struggled; and again shrieked so wildly that her cries were borne into the upper air; but this time the fishermen did not hear

them. They had gone on their way, and there were no other human beings near. There stood the Fort, making, in its ruined grimness, the desolate sands look yet more desolate, and, save the shrimper, who not an hour ago had seen Henrietta Thornton enter its walls, and who was now wading, some distance off, in the fast incoming waves, no one was in sight. No one to guess that a tragedy was going on within the decaying Fort as awful as it had ever witnessed in the days of its fiercest and cruellest strength.

But the poor, desperate creature was held tightly and firmly. Clapsed closer and closer, for all her struggles, to his bosom—nay, sometimes kissed again, and her face wet with tears, as he almost moaned, “What else have you left for me to do? But why did you drive me to it?” and the waves were coming in, forcing their way over the sands, and through the crevices

in the stonework. She felt them round her feet, creeping higher, wetting her garments ; and still he held her there—still he kept her waiting—waiting with him for the death that, it may be, now, he thought, would wed them anew.

He would share it with her. Right or wrong he had resolved upon that. He could not go and leave her there to meet the waves, as they crept in, alone. He would stand by her to the last—if the cruel waters took him too, so much the better for them both. Surely the Lord who had demanded the sacrifice of this guilty woman at his hands would forgive him this. More would not be asked of him than flesh and blood and the manhood in him could give ; and it would be against all his manhood, against human nature, against the strong, passionate love rolling and surging in him to leave her there—alone !

No, they would wait together.

On it came—the still, cold death creeping around and climbing higher still. Through all the darkness it was the one palpable reality. There was no fury in its approach—it was not advancing with the roar and the spring of a wild beast, famishing for his prey—rather it came calmly on, its waves lapping each other as they mounted higher and higher, as if they were the tongues of tigers gloating over their coming banquet, but so sure of it that they could afford to wait and dally with the anticipation of the living feast. It was then only a question of hours—now, but of minutes ; if the tide came calmly, it came quickly ; yet a little and it would be round her throat, forcing itself within her lips, blinding her eyes more horribly than even this darkness, and then sucking her down in its embrace, and choking her life away.

Was there nothing to be done ? Must she stand there in that madman's grasp, and

wait—and wait—and nothing more? Could nothing be done? Nothing to free herself from the horrible embrace which was holding her with such deadly purpose? And, at the thought, a frenzied strength rose within her, and she burst from his clasp as she might have done from a child's, and rushed from him as fast as the waters—which were now up to her knees—would let her, she knew not where in that dense, terrible darkness, but anywhere to be free from him. Was he coming after her? She could not tell. Presently she heard his movements, as it were, in the water, now every moment coming higher. If she could only evade him long enough to grope her way to the steps down which he had brought her—only reach them before the tide submerged her! She was afraid even to breathe, lest he should hear her—afraid to move lest her footing should fail her on the slippery stones, which were in

some places more dangerous yet through the tangles of sea-weed which grew out of them. She leaned against the wall to which she had found her way, and listened intently to his movements.

Presently he gave a sigh. She was so still that it might be he imagined she had fallen beneath the waters, or fainted. He was only within a yard of her—he could not be more—she heard that sigh so audibly. Then she was in doubt as to whether she should stay where she was and risk the chance of his finding her, or move away. Before she had time to decide, he turned. He was going farther away. She was saved! Surely he would mount the stairs and find his way to light and life. Some instinct would keep him from staying there. He would never be content to sit down and wait his death alone. Was he going towards them? Did not that sound show that he was mounting upwards? If so she

had but to wait, and in a little time might find her way there too, and once in the upper part of the Fort, with light and air around, even if he were still within it, she would have some chance of safety.

He was going!—he was going! If he would only move quicker. The tide was making its way fast in; but she was sure he was ascending the stairs. Did he hope to find her on them? or was he only bent on his own safety? She grew more hopeful, even though the waters were every minute becoming higher. There was a chance of life yet. An hysterical passion was almost mastering her. She could have cried and laughed by turns, had it not been that she knew that he would hear her. A chance—almost a certainty, as she heard another weary sigh, and then a movement, as if he were still making his way upward. She kept still and motionless; she was sure now that that was best for her; when presently,

as if the waters would not after all be cheated of their prey, some stones which had long been crumbling into decay gave way at last, and the waves swept in with such a force that the poor, cowering creature standing there, almost afraid to breathe, lest her very life should be forfeited, was sucked underneath them as they swept in triumphantly, dashing down, in the same moment, the wretched man who stood upon the slimy steps, which for the last moment had almost lifted him out of their clutch, and then, as if rejoicing that their two victims were at last secured, gambolling and playing and lapping more like tiger and tigress than ever, as they mounted higher and higher yet in the tomb that held their prey, or followed closer up the steps on which they had hurled him down, the man who had so nearly eluded their embrace.

CHAPTER II.

BORNE BACK TO LIFE.

AUDLEY DALE was detained on parade longer even than he had expected; at last—at least half an hour after the time he had appointed to be at the Fort—he was able to leave the ground, and proceed towards the place of his appointment.

It was better for him to walk there. There was no place in the vicinity of the Fort to which he could safely tether his horse, and it was not advisable to bring a servant with him. Consequently it was some time before he reached the ruin, and when there, the tide was fast coming up.

“She would hardly wait for me,” he thought; “it would scarcely be prudent. The old place will soon be covered below; still she may be there; I will go inside and look. It will be just my luck if, after all, she has gone home thoroughly angry. I wonder when I shall have the chance of giving her an explanation.”

He looked around, he went up the old stone stairs, but Mrs. Thornton was not to be seen. Only, in the upper portion of the tower he caught sight of a small lace handkerchief she sometimes wore round her neck. He picked it up: “I hope this will make my peace with her to-morrow. She has evidently been here, and gone home disgusted. Confound that old Clissold! What on earth made him pitch upon to-day for a parade?”

Down he went, out of humour with himself and everything beside. The damp, slippery stairs were so many sources of

annoyance to him. He almost sprained his ancle in coming down, and his undress uniform bore marks of the stones against which it had come in contact. "I hope the next appointment Mrs. Thornton makes, she'll choose a pleasanter meeting place," was his thought. He was ungrateful enough just then to be angry even with her, and he left the Fort in a frame of mind that showed itself sufficiently in his face. He was every way vexed, grieved more than he liked to own, at not having recovered his letters, and angry with Mrs. Thornton because he felt that she would consider she had some right to be angry with him. He passed the shrimper who had seen her go into the Fort, and who was now returning homeward with his nets full of his small victims, without answering the man's civil "good-day," and passed hastily on, leaving the other looking wonderingly after him.

“I wonder if he went in thar to meet his lady, an’ if she ha’ given him the slip. I saw her go in, an’ I suppose she hev cum out without my lookin’. ’Twar the passun’s wife of St. Hilder, I reckon, an’ if so, thar’s some queer game or other goin’ on, which the passun would n’t like to hear of, I should say.”

He chuckled quietly to himself. This was a little tit-bit of scandal which would give as great a relish to his supper, as the shrimps he was going home to boil, would to the teas and breakfasts of the visitors to Wearmouth; and then he went on his way, dismissing the matter from his thoughts, till, like the fishermen who had heard Henrietta Thornton’s frenzied cry, things came to pass which made him, too, remember the events of that afternoon.

Audley Dale had scarcely left the Fort when Harold Thornton struggled into its lower chamber like a drunken man. He

was alive—alive when he had gone prepared to meet death face to face—when he had met the cold rush of the waters sweeping over him, and thought, as he was hurled down upon the slippery stone, up which he was making his way, that now, at last, the end of all had come, and wondered whether the waters that swept over him had in the same instant submerged his wife. As he fell prone against an upper stone with such a force that cut his temple, and left him insensible for a time, he had just one wish dimly struggling through his failing consciousness, and that was, that he might have still held her in his arms, that so they might have passed to their last sleep together. That was the last thought he remembered; now, as he looked vacantly around the bare grey walls of the Fort, it was hard to realize the fact that he was still a living, breathing man; and, just at first, he could realize nothing more; not

even ask himself how it was he had escaped the death that had seemed so imminent.

It was the merest chance—the waves, as they poured in from the aperture they had made in the wall, where for months they had been trying to effect an entrance, had thrown him on the upper steps. Had he not already ascended several, he could hardly have escaped with life. As it was, he lay with his head and shoulders above water, and at last, when consciousness slowly returned, was able, with a feeble instinct, to move towards the light that came on him faintly from above.

Had he not recovered when he did, he must inevitably have perished. The tide would soon surround the Fort, and every one of the lower steps be under water. He staggered in his weakness towards the door, and then some memory of his wife returned to him. He could hear the waters plashing forward, lapping each

other still, as if in anticipation of their prey—no, rather was it not as if now, like wild beasts, with their hunger satisfied, they were gloating over the memory of their banquet?

It was all over,—long ere this she must have paid the penalty of her sin. How strange the chance that had spared him, and had taken her! Chance! did he dare to call it so? rather was it not thus that his Lord had shown him He had still work for him to do? that he was not to fling away his life because he was weary of it, or because he loved so weakly the fair, false woman sleeping her last beneath the cold dark waves below?

Something of this floated through his mind, vaguely and dreamily; he had no strength as yet to think coherently. He tried to walk—he felt numbed, feeble, and chilled—but his limbs refused to carry him. What should he do? stay where he was,

and if the waters, now already laving his feet, mounted yet higher, yield himself their prey? No! he had not been spared for that, he had not been thrust back into life, when he most wished to die, merely to fling his life away again. He must make an effort now to live, although it would have been so much easier to lie down there and slowly breathe away his last. He dragged his limbs up the steep stone stairs, down which he had led his wife not two hours ago, to wait till the coming tide had abated, and then sat down, to wait till the incoming tide should ebb, just where she had sat by the window that looked over the Denes—sat there, weary and worn-out, till at last the pain that was pressing on his brain, the dull, deadly anguish, brought its own relief, and he slept heavily for hours, just as those sleep upon the rack, and woke like them, to feel the rest had only given him greater strength to suffer.

CHAPTER III.

HAROLD THORNTON'S RETURN HOME.

IT was dark that night when Harold Thornton reached his home ; Clare let him in, and one look at his blanched face, with the blood still oozing from a cut in his temple, his garments stained with salt water, and the worn, utter hopelessness of his face, told her something very near the truth. He had avenged her on his wife, after such a sort as she had not dared to hope for ; anything so tragic as that which she guessed must have happened, was beyond her wildest fancies. She made no remark, she lit his candle when he asked

for it, enquired if he would have tea or supper, and then, receiving a negative answer, withdrew, while he went wearily and painfully up the stairs, and shut himself in his own room.

Deb had plenty to say when Clare joined her.

“Marster tew cum home, an’ not missus. What for is she stoppin’ out like this? Is he tew tired tew eat? Where’s the good of gittin’ food ready for such folks, I’d like tew know.”

“I dare say he’s been a long round,” said Clare; “perhaps he may have had something where he’s been visiting.”

“Not like,” said Deb, “it’s only the poor see much of he—an’ he wudn’t rob them of a crust or a tater. Now, I expect he’s walked and talked, an’ spent hisself till he’s that tired he could n’t lift a fork to his mouth.”

“I wonder what Mrs. Thornton is stay-

ing out so late for?" said Clare. She never used the terms, master or mistress, disdaining them as much as would any American help.

"She ort tew be home tew see arter him," said Deb; "but thar, they do n't get on tew well together, an' it's not to be wondered at after all; he's a rare good 'un, the marster, but I doubt if your rare good men make the best husbands. A wife wants her man for herself; not tew be so full o' savin' other people's souls, that he's never time to sit down by his own fireside in comfort, or take her out for a bit o' pleasurin'. I dew like the marster, but I would n't have one so good as he for myself; I'd far rather a man that could take his drink now and then, so long as he was n't quarrelsome about it, or that swore a bit, so long as it was in reason; but as to the marster, he's tew full o' the next world ever tew be o' much comfort tew a wife in this."

Time went on, and it grew late. "What's keepin' the missus?" said Deb, "she never stayed out like this afore without lettin' one know; I'm rare an' sleepy; do you think she'll come home tew-night, may be she's stoppin' somewhere, an' we might as well go to bed at once."

"It would be better to speak to Mr. Thornton first," said Clare; "I'll go and see if he's asleep."

She tapped at his bedroom door, but no answer came; she could hear his heavy breathing—the heavy breathing of a deep, almost unnatural, slumber. She tried his door; it was not locked. No fear of waking him if she entered—she crept in with her lighted candle in her hand, and looked round. The clothes that he had worn were thrown on the ground; Clare lifted them up, and felt each garment curiously; the very coat was wet to the shoulders—wet too, she was sure, with salt water—soiled

and smirched with sea-weed, and with rubbing against stones. She felt in the different pockets—every paper was wet ; but there was nothing to throw any light on the transactions of the last few hours. She looked at the sleeper ; he was breathing heavily, his head thrown back, his hair in disorder on the pillow ; he was pale, too—fearfully pale—and there was that strange gash on the temple.

Clare thought awhile, her own face paling as she did so ; then she gathered together the clothes Mr. Thornton had thrown off, and took them into her own room. After that she went down to Deb.

“ Mr. Thornton is asleep, and I should n’t like to wake him ; I opened the door and listened, but he never heard me. Poor man ! he seems thoroughly tired out. Do you go to bed, Deb, and I ’ll sit up. I ’ve a letter to write, and a bonnet to trim, so there’s no fear of my falling asleep. I dare

say Mrs. Thornton is at Beechside. She might have had a little more consideration than to keep me up two nights running."

Deb went off very readily, and when she had gone, Clare crept up to her room, and brought down Mr. Thornton's garments. She spread them by the kitchen fire to dry, and meanwhile sat down, neither to write her letter, nor trim her bonnet, but to think matters over.

"Something's happened," she said, but was afraid, even to her own thoughts, to realize quite what had occurred. She had hoped, panted, yearned for vengeance, and it had come so speedily that she was almost stunned by the realization of her own wishes. That sleeping man upstairs had been her unconscious agent. She was not sorry for him—that pale, corpse-like face she had just seen on the pillow, the weary hopelessness of the eyes that had met her on his return home, did not move her to

compassion. There was no pity in her for any hurt that was not her own, but it might be best that, whatever fate might have overtaken his wife, he should not as yet be suspected of having had any share in it. She had no plans, no schemes for the future. All, as yet, was vague and uncertain. She had a dim hope that if Audley Dale still refused to keep his promise to her, she might, through this night's work, punish him for so doing, quite as surely as if she had his letters still in her possession. But to make sure of that, let what might have chanced, all suspicion must, if possible, be diverted from Mr. Thornton. "If he's brains enough to keep his own counsel, I'll keep it for him," said Clare; and at any rate, if she did not pity or like, she did not hate him—he, at least, had never injured her. So when his clothes were dry enough for the purpose, Clare brushed, and mended, and removed every trace, as far as possible,

that the sea and the Fort might have left. There was still the smell of salt water, but the Rector was so careless of his clothes, and so often exposed to the spray, and the incoming tide, that there was always that about his garments ; and at last, when daylight was breaking, Clare carried them softly upstairs, placed them by the sleeper's side, without disturbing him, and then lay down for an hour or two on her own bed, to get what rest she might.

When she came down in the morning, Deb asked her what time the missus had come home—and opened her round eyes wide at hearing she had not made her appearance. Presently she offered a solution of her conduct. “I reckon the marster an’ she ha’ had a quarrel—he’s a good man, but he’s tryin’—perhaps she’s gone to her friends.”

“I never heard of her having any,” said Clare, “but it may be.” Then she wondered

whether Deb's guess was a correct one. Mrs. Thornton might only have quarrelled with her husband and gone away—but gone where? She *had* no friends, as Clare had said. Letters scarcely ever came for her; she never went from home on a visit to relations, and excepting her aunt, Mrs. Harrup, no one had ever heard of her having any one connected with her. “Could she”—Clare’s soul sickened within her at the thought—“*could* she have gone to Audley Dale?” If after all she had only planned and toiled and schemed to drive her into his arms! She would be shamed, disgraced, but what of that! She would not hear—Clare in her soul believed would not care for—the sneers and reproaches that her conduct would call forth. She might obtain a divorce; “fine folks can get anything for money,” thought Clare revengefully, “and then become Audley’s wife. She’s cunning enough to manage that, and

he's a fool that may be talked into anything," thought Clare.

She went about her work ; she could not sit still and think—anything rather than that—she was almost frenzied by the possibility that, after all, everything she had done—every step she had taken, had only served to place Mrs. Thornton in the position she had so coveted for herself. “She would be the town's talk, but what of that ?” to have married Audley Dale, Clare would have been content to have been the talk of a dozen towns. She said nothing more to Deb ; she would wait and see how things turned out before she did, and so she went on with her brushing and dusting to all appearance as if no higher interests than those connected with brushes and dusters ever occupied her thoughts.

Presently Deb came to her. “The marster's not down yet, an' it's nigh eleven ; will he hev a bit of breakfast in bed, an'

had n't I better go an' ask him how about dinner? Tew think of his lyin' thar an' havin' no more sence than not tew know that it's time things war set agoin'. But there! he never did know how tew relish his food like a Christian. He allus did try me in that way, an' I do n't wonder that the missus found him hard to put up with."

"I dare say he's tired," said Clare. "I know I heard him say yesterday he had a long round before him"—which was a pure fiction of Clare's, invented for the occasion—"but I'll go and knock at his door, and ask him if you shall take him anything."

She knocked, but no answer came—she listened, but the deep, heavy breathing of last night had ceased. "Was he dead?" Her conscience smote her just a little—this would be more than she had counted on—she had to pause and collect her courage before she had nerve enough this time to open the door and look in.

No ; she need not have been so alarmed. Mr. Thornton was not only living, but awake. Another look told her that he might possibly not live long, and that the waking was very far removed from consciousness. His eyes were wide open, but they saw nothing, and the head which had been so corpse-like last night was now moving restlessly to and fro on the pillow, and the hands plucking nervously at the counterpane. She spoke to him, but received no answer. He was clearly not aware of her presence. "Fever," said Clare. "I wonder if he'll be delirious?" She made up her mind that if he did become so she would nurse him. Whatever was to be gathered from his ravings nobody but herself should gather, unless she saw fit to let them share the knowledge. Then she went down, and told Deb Mr. Thornton was ill, and, despatching her at once for a medical man, went back

to her master's room to prepare it for visitors.

She glanced at the clothes which she had brushed so carefully, and laid them where they could hardly fail to catch the doctor's eye. "If anything *has* happened," she thought, "they'll tell no tales." Then she proceeded, with her usual deftness, to arrange the chamber, after which she surveyed her patient.

"I do n't like that cut. 'T ain't so much in itself, but it has a queer look. I'll sponge it and put some sticking-plaster on, and make the doctor believe he'd sense enough to do it for himself when he came home last night. It's just that cut and the state of his clothes makes me think that something has happened, and that things have n't gone quite so smoothly with madam after all."

Presently Mr. Thornton spoke ; at first in feeble, uncertain tones, then louder and

more coherently. Clare stopped in her ministrations to listen, and this was pretty well what she heard—

“What else could I do? How was life possible for either of us? Yes, the tide is coming in fast—faster still. It will soon carry us both away into eternity. That is best. I could not go and leave her there alone. How could she bear it, poor frail thing, without me to sustain her? The soul that sinneth it shall surely die. But it will not be the soul, here—surely—after this dark passage there will be peace and safety in the other world—a new life to begin afresh when the sinful flesh can tempt no more. God will not slay her utterly. He will give His pardon even in the eleventh hour.”

Then Clare guessed dimly what had taken place. Something of a sullen satisfaction pervaded her soul, overmastering its first instinctive horror, and yet she felt a little disappointed. This revenge was too

full, too thorough, and yet not enough. The woman she had hated with all her soul was out of her power—gone where neither gibe nor scorn nor taunt could hurt her. She would have liked to have seen her shamed and humbled : and now she was where shame and humiliation could never reach her. She would have wished her to be struck down, but to have known whose hand it was that struck her. She would know nothing now. In her last hours she would have felt that the blow which felled her came from her husband's hand alone. She would never have dreamed that it was the woman she had cheated, insulted, and despoiled, who had prompted him to give that blow. After all, Clare's vengeance was incomplete, even in its thoroughness. Her mistress was as much raised above her in her death as she had been in her life.

“It had come home to madam,” as she said, and yet she wished it had not come

home quite so fully : that she was still here, a living, breathing woman, taught, at length, what it was to quiver beneath her husband's anger, and the scorn of the little world around her. She was out of her reach at last, as much as if she had been flying from Wearmouth with Audley Dale.

Clare had not very much time to think that, after all, there was a bitter-sweet even in her revenge, when Mr. Harben returned with Deb. He was not at all surprised at finding Mr. Thornton laid up. "It was only what he had been long expecting," he said to Clare. "No constitution could stand the wear and tear of the life that Mr. Thornton led. There was a low fever set in. He would want quiet, rest, and careful nursing. Where was Mrs. Thornton?"

Clare looked down, and replied gravely, as if she hardly knew how to communicate such an awkward piece of intelligence, that her mistress had left home the preceding

day, and had not yet returned. Mr. Harben looked puzzled. Clare's manner implied that something was wrong. Then he asked when she was expected back.

Clare knew nothing—did not even know when she went that she was not going to return that day. Had sat up for her all night, in fact—only hoped that nothing had happened—but, perhaps it was not quite right for her to say so—Mr. and Mrs. Thornton had not been on the best of terms lately. Possibly that might have something to do with the fact of Mrs. Thornton's not returning home yesterday. She could not resist throwing this bit of dirt at her mistress, and she saw that it stuck where she had thrown it, by Mr. Harben's altered face. He had heard—as who had not in Wearmouth?—a little of the gossip and scandal that seemed so to delight in gathering round Mrs. Thornton's name. He knew how it had been connected with Audley

Dale's, and he now formed his own surmises respecting her absence. But, of course, his patient was the first object of his thoughts. Who was to look to him when the wife, who should have done so, was away? "There's not a nurse to be had in the place but Mrs. Somers," he said; "and she is hardly to be trusted in a case like this."

"I do n't think there is any occasion to engage a nurse," said Clare, modestly. "If you will be good enough to give me your directions, sir, I will do my best to carry them out. I am fond of nursing. I was so much with the Honourable Miss Dale in her last illness that I got quite accustomed to it."

Whenever Clare wished to impress any one profoundly with the fact that she was the most respectable and trustworthy young person living, she always made use of the Honourable Miss Dale. Her name impressed Mr. Harben now. He looked at Clare, and felt that he could not leave his patient in

better hands. "A clever young woman, discreet, well-behaved, and knows her place," he thought. "I wish there were more such now-a-days." Then he gave his orders, to which Clare gave the readiest and most respectful attention. "Keep him quiet, and keep him up with good beef tea and port wine. He won't bear lowering. He's lowered himself already too much."

"Mr. Thornton never *would* consider himself," said Clare, meekly.

"Ah! well—we must think not only of souls, but of the bodies that hold them. About this cut—have you any idea how that came? I don't attach much importance to it in itself, but he must have fallen, or something of the kind, to have caused it."

"He seemed very weak and exhausted when he came home," said Clare. "I noticed the cut then, but I did not like to ask him about it. Perhaps he may have staggered against a wall, being so weak,

and cut it. He could hardly have fallen, for his clothes, as you see, sir, don't look as if that had been the case."

Mr. Harben just glanced at the garments to which Clare pointed. "No—they don't look as if he'd had a fall. I dare say it was as you say. Well, I'll leave him in your hands now. I'll send him in something in an hour or two, and look in again in the evening. We must both do our best, but we've a tough job before us, I can tell you. This has been coming on for months. He was about much too soon after that last attack, but he would n't be guided."

Clare opened the bed-room door for the doctor, with her usual civility, and rang the bell for Deb to show him out of the house; and Mr. Harben went away, thoroughly satisfied with one thing, and that was, that, if he had searched Eastshire through, he could not have found a better nurse for his patient.

CHAPTER IV.

A BOLD GAME PLAYED IN VAIN.

CLARE, once duly installed by Mr. Harben in her master's room as nurse, set to work to fulfil her duties with due propriety. She set Deb to make the beef-tea, giving her strict directions as to its strength, administered the port wine, and the mixtures that Mr. Harben sent, just as he had desired her, and when she could do nothing else, and her patient had dropped off into an uneasy sleep, sat down by the window, and took up a little crochet edging, as the quietest employment for a sick chamber. Mr. Thornton had not been wandering since

the morning, and had not spoken while the doctor was present, so that there had been nothing to excite his suspicions. Clare hoped they would not be excited. If any odium arising from Mrs. Thornton's disappearance was to fall on any one, let it be on Audley Dale, unless, indeed, Audley Dale were to make it worth her while to clear him. She took out his note, which Mr. Thornton had dropped the day before in his study, and, as she read it again, observed, much as she had done then, "This may be worth all that madam took from me. If anything turns up about her, let him clear himself as he can—without me."

Mr. Thornton's bed-room window was in the front of the Rectory, so that whoever sat by it, as Clare did, could hardly fail to see any one approaching the house, and Clare had not sat there very long before she saw Audley Dale slowly coming up the path through the church-yard. He had

decided upon coming, although Clare was in the house. He had had a telegram from the Palace at Drowsehead to-day, summoning him there. The Bishop had gout, which threatened to fly to the stomach. But whenever the Bishop did have gout, it always threatened to fly to that sensitive portion of his frame, and the Bishop trembled accordingly, and gathered his children round him, and prepared to resign himself to his latter end as it behoved a dignitary of the Church to do. This time the attack had been rather more serious than usual, and the Bishop being alarmed accordingly, both Maurice and Audley Dale had been sent for, and the former was now making his way to the Palace, sure of finding in the precincts of Drowsehead some supply for his pulpit; and the latter, having obtained leave of absence from his colonel, had now sought the Rectory of St. Hilda, in the hope of seeing Mrs. Thornton, and

obtaining the letters she had secured for him.

“I shall go with a much easier mind if I know they’re all right. I dare say that Jezebel will be wanting to have them back again. I wonder how Mrs. Thornton persuaded her to give them up to her,”—and, as he raised his hand to the knocker, before he could reach it, the “Jezebel” of whom he had been thinking opened the door, and stood before him, trim, calm, demure and self-possessed as ever.

“I saw you coming, Mr. Dale,” she said; “and, as Mr. Thornton is seriously ill, I made haste down that you should not knock and disturb him. We must have the knocker muffled. Will you please to step inside?”

He followed her into the dining-room. Deb, who was in her kitchen, did not hear him, and Clare, closing the door, stood with

her back to it; and then, in a voice, low, calm, distinct, but totally different, in the threatening under-tone pervading it, from the well-bred accents with which she had met him at the door, said, "What have you done with Mrs. Thornton?"

He looked up surprised. She saw in a moment that, let whatever might have occurred yesterday, he knew nothing; but she would not let him see that she credited his ignorance. She went on—

"Yesterday Mrs. Thornton left her house to meet you, by appointment, at the Fort. It is useless to deny it, Mr. Audley Dale. You are clever at deception, as I know, but you cannot deceive me in this. She has not returned home—we have heard nothing of her. Perhaps, if you choose, you can tell us something."

He was alarmed—too much so at first to trouble himself about the covert insolence in Clare's tone. The tide was coming in

fast when he was at the Fort—had any harm happened to the poor, good-natured woman, who had tried her best to be a good friend to him and Milly? Clare saw his alarm. “Afraid for her,” she thought; “we’ll soon give him something else to quake for.”

“What time did Mrs. Thornton leave the house?” he asked hurriedly. “You don’t mean to say that nothing has been seen or heard of her since?”

“No one in *this* house has,” said Clare; “and it is only natural we should go to you for information. You and I know each other, Mr. Audley Dale—I know what the worth of your word is when pledged to a woman. Just tell me this—have you taken Mrs. Thornton away from her home to live with you as your mistress—or, getting tired of her, and thinking that a match with Miss Lisdale would be better, have you disposed of her in some other

way? The Fort is a desolate old place. Few people go near it; and if the sea washes a dead body away, it is a long time coming back to tell tales!"

Sheer amazement kept the young man quiet for a moment—that any sane person should dream such things, or even hint them to him! What did the woman mean by it? As if, let what might have happened to poor Mrs. Thornton, he was in any way answerable for it. Only she *had* gone out to meet him, and if any harm had happened to her through doing so, was he not to blame? He should blame himself for ever! more than ever blame that miserable folly of his which had led to her appointing to meet him in that strange lonely place, instead of receiving him in her own home, because of the woman standing there. Clare made him soon feel that blame might rest upon him in another and quite different manner; he might be called to account

by something a little harder to appease than his own conscience.

“That is what people will say—that is what people will think,” she said solemnly, “when they know how things were, when they know that Mrs. Thornton went to meet you at the Fort, and nothing has been seen of her since. They will know it, they must know it, and any way it will be ruin to you. Don’t you see yourself all that may come of it? I think—if I chose—I could save you—I am sure I could; but I will not do it to be flung aside again, trampled on, and deceived, because you think that another, and a richer woman, may make you a better wife than I; she never could! there’s not the woman living that could do it! Audley Dale, you’ve used me very hardly, cheated, and laughed at me, but I’ll forgive everything, and clear you from this danger—a more serious one than you dream of—if only you’ll keep the word

you gave me five years ago—the word you gave me when you and I were boy and girl together, and no wicked woman like that false evil creature, who has broken her husband's heart, and done her best to ruin your life, had come between us."

There was something of passion in her tone. She simulated it pretty well. All the time the man to whom she was pleading, before whom she was half kneeling, whose hand she was trying in vain to touch—for he had drawn it out of her reach, and placed it behind him—felt that he himself was not the prize at which she was aiming; that for him she cared little; that his station and means were all she struggled for; and, looking on her, and going back to the early folly which she recalled, remembered that it was true he had once spoken of love, thought of it, dreamed of it, in connection with the woman before him.

Something of such thoughts burst involuntarily from his lips as he turned from her. "To think that I should ever have been such a fool!" he cried, and felt ashamed and humbled as he thought of Milly Lisdale, and wondered how, after having stooped to Charlotte Clare, he could ever have dared to raise his eyes to her.

"Is that all you have to say?" said Clare sullenly, and, drawing herself back from him, she stood and glared with her green eyes, like a wild creature about to spring. If he had only known it, she was dangerous as any savage denizen of the forest—even more so—she would not aim at life alone. It seemed as if a life had been given her in answer to her yearning for revenge, and she was not satisfied therewith, she would kill name, repute, all that made life worth living, if she had her will.

"You won't do me right," she continued, "and you know what you have promised me

over and over again. How many women do you think would have waited as patiently as I have done, when a word from them would have exposed you? Year after year has gone on, and you have put me off under one excuse or another, and at last I have had to bear the seeing you by that false, vile woman, who called herself my mistress, and pretending to court Miss Lisdale merely as a blind. I know it all—every one knows it—it is that which has killed Mrs. Thornton—it is that which has set the whole country talking of you and her. They will have a little more to talk of before long; even Miss Lisdale will have her eyes opened at last; when I tell them who was last with that miserable woman at the Fort, and show the letter that he wrote to decoy her there.”

It was her last card, and a bold one to play. She had counted on the weak, inert nature Audley Dale had shown as a boy, when he

had cowered even before his father's easy rule, and sunk an easy prey to her stronger nature. But Audley Dale had grown a little stronger since then ; perhaps to such as he, the love of a good true woman is the best tonic possible ; and besides, Clare had forgotten that she had a gentleman to deal with, one over whom physical or material terrors would have very little influence. She had thought to cow him, and instead, had put him on his mettle. He turned on her now as he had never done yet.

“ If you were not a woman I'd strike you to the ground for daring to speak of your mistress, or couple her name with mine, as you have done. Do your worst ; I will not sacrifice my whole life for a boyish folly, which I repented of almost as soon as it was committed ; but I may as well tell you one thing, to show how utterly hopeless it is for you to dream that I will repair that folly by committing an infinitely

greater, that if you were the only woman in the world, and had everything which you have not—riches, beauty, rank—I wouldn't take you; it's plain speaking, but not too plain for the woman who forgets, as you have done, that she is one."

Then he went away, and Charlotte Clare felt at last that all hope of ever becoming Mrs. Audley Dale was over. She was foiled and baffled in the one great purpose of her life, but another purpose took its place, and one that she would follow as steadily and perseveringly as ever tiger did his victim's trail.

CHAPTER V.

A COOL RECEPTION.

THAT evening, Audley Dale was borne off to Drowsehead as fast as the express could carry him. The Bishop was not so very bad after all ; indeed, the disorder had taken a turn for the better, after the telegrams had been dispatched for his sons ; but he was gratified with their prompt attendance. He had a great deal of natural, if not very fervent, affection in him, and his sense of importance was gratified by the manner in which they had hastened to his bedside. Altogether, as the gout subsided, they found him in a

much pleasanter frame of mind than he had been in at Tring. He was amongst his own people, and things went on at Drowsehead much as if the world had been asleep there for the last thirty years, and was slowly—very slowly—waking up, but without the slightest intention of catching up those who had been awake all those years. Life went on slowly and peacefully at Drowsehead ; disturbances came from without, it is true, in the shape of such letters as had followed him to Tring ; but, at Drowsehead, the Bishop had his secretary and his chaplain to lighten his cares, and he was not brought in actual contact with the new men, and the new ideas, that were making such havoc with the things that had been.

Maurice, too, did not trouble him very much here. Maurice was really sorry for his father's illness, and let himself be talked to and reasoned with both by his father and his chaplain—a man who, as a Bishop's

chaplain should be, was of a like mind to his lord—and he did not broach any of his favourite political heresies, and was content to read such papers as were in favour at the palace—the *Ensign* and the *True Churchman*—and, if he fell asleep over either, to do so when nobody espied him. Altogether, the Bishop had such comfort in the visit of his sons that before the time was up for either to return, he had been brought to see that it would be altogether a good and desirable thing for the younger to marry Miss Lisdale, of Beechside, and to give his consent to the proposed marriage, and announce his readiness to welcome the young lady into his family—promising too, as soon as he was able to look into matters, to see what further allowance he should be justified in making Audley, for the purpose of enabling him to keep house in a becoming manner. His sisters too, commissioned Audley to invite the young lady to Beechside in their

name, that they might have an opportunity of becoming as intimate with her as their future relationship made desirable ; and altogether, things were looking well for Audley Dale.

“ I was quite right to wait,” he thought, “ till my father had had time to recover himself. I dare say Mrs. Thornton was right. The cook and the other disagreeables at Tring were too much for his temper. He has come right just as she said he would if left to himself.”

Then he fell into a train of uneasy thought respecting Mrs. Thornton. What had happened to her ; that friendly, good-natured creature, with whom he had been on such terms of intimacy ? He was sorry for her, much as he might have been if she had been another man. His liking for her was nearly of the same sort. What could have happened to her on that day that he appointed to meet her at the Fort ? Surely

she would have left it before the tide came up? It seemed so horrible to think of that kind, good-tempered, friendly creature battling for her life in the waters, and he almost within ear-shot of her cries. Then, was there any foundation for what Clare had said as regarded Mr. Thornton's jealousy of him and her? He could never be so insane? What man in his senses could have construed the pleasant, friendly liking they entertained for each other into anything of a different nature? And Mr. Thornton, wrapped up in so many thoughts of another world, so many schemes of salvation, would be the last surely to harbour such idle imaginations. He could not have anything to do with his wife's disappearance. She might have left him in a fit of pique at some imagined neglect—perhaps by this time had returned. News from Wearmouth did not reach Drowsehead—he did not even hear from Milly; she having prudently declined

to enter into a correspondence till their engagement was avowed. No doubt he should find Mrs. Thornton at the Rectory when he paid his first morning call there.

He came back to Wearmouth in good spirits. He was a little disquieted about Clare, but not seriously so. No doubt she would do her worst, and, even though Mrs. Thornton had secured his letters, the other might still be able to cause him serious annoyance. He had had half a mind to write to Temple Masters and tell him how things stood now, but writing on such a subject was necessarily unpleasant, recalling, as every word would do, his past folly ; therefore he resolved to postpone the doing so till he saw further occasion. " And come the worst to the worst," he said to himself, " people will only set me down as a fool, and I think Milly's fond enough of me to overlook even that."

He called at Beechside the morning after

his return from Drowsehead, asking, of course, for Mrs. Rushington, and was shown, not into the bright, pleasant morning-room, to which he, in common with the intimates of the house, had the *entrée*, but into the drawing-room, an apartment which was almost petrifying in its splendour, and reserved only for state occasions and ceremonious visits. He was kept waiting ten minutes, and ten minutes, in his circumstances, in an unoccupied room, may be fairly described as almost equal in suspense and unpleasantness to the ten minutes spent in a dentist's waiting-room. He was not in general afraid of Mrs. Rushington, but, looking at her as the mother of the young lady whose hand he had come formally to ask for, he did feel a little afraid of her now. Quite enough so to make the ten minutes seem an hour during which he was kept waiting, and to throw him into an almost intolerable state of nervous anxiety.

“I hope I shall get through the thing pretty decently,” he thought. “I wonder if she’ll be considerate enough to help a fellow out at all. Whatever did they mean by showing me in here? I don’t believe I shall get over it half so well, with all this gilding and buhl staring me in the face, as I should have done in that cosy little den on the other side of the house. I wonder if Milly’s in there, and if I shall be taken in to see her when I’ve got this over.”

Then Mrs. Rushington came in, but she was not the Mrs. Rushington with whom he had been on terms of such pleasant, friendly intercourse. She was chill, austere, and grave—it was Mrs. Rushington iced, with all her geniality and pleasantness gone. What did it all mean? Why on earth did she give him only the tips of her fingers and seat herself with such majesty on one of the most throne-like of the easy chairs? And why did she look

almost displeased when he asked after Milly, and enquire in such freezing accents after his lordship ?

He had never seen the room in which he now was but on one or two state occasions, when lights and flowers and merry people made its splendours bearable. He had always been shown direct into the apartment which Milly and her mother usually occupied, where there were so many things to suggest conversation and fill up blanks if a pause occurred ; but what was there here ? The very blinds were drawn down so that he could see nothing of the outside world, and the spotless brown-holland covers, if they concealed the gorgeousness of the satin draperies, were so suggestive of hidden pomps that he felt more over-awed than if the bravery they concealed had been palpable to the eye.

If he could only have been in that pretty morning room, where there was nothing to

spoil, and nothing to preserve, with all its litter of books and flowers, work and drawing, and the hundred things to show that if Milly was not there at the present time, she had only recently vacated the apartment, he could have begun his story, and gone on with it so much better ; but how was he to begin it, and how was he to go on, with Mrs. Rushington sitting there in awful state, looking at him as if she expected him to go within a quarter of an hour, and was rather wondering why he had come at all ?

But at last he got into his story. It had to be told, and he was not going away without telling it, and Mrs. Rushington heard him—if one might say such a thing of her—grimly ; her face growing colder, harder, more mask-like with every word. When he had said all he had to say, he looked anxiously to her. “She might help me now,” he thought, “it’s too bad not

to give me a hand after all. I suppose the truth is, she's found out I'd made it all right with Milly before I came to her. Hang it all ! can't she find a word ?"

Mrs. Rushington did find a word at last. "I am very sorry," she began, much in the same tone in which, now and then, she lectured Milly or Beatey, when they had been guilty of any serious transgression against *les bienséances*, "that circumstances at present render it impossible for me to accept, on my daughter's behalf, the honour you offer her. Had things been otherwise, I will not say but that it would have given me much pleasure to have acquainted her with the interest you have manifested, but as they are, there is but one course open to me—I think, upon reflection, even you must see that."

"I do n't know what I am to see," said Audley, feeling petrified, as each word fell like an ice-bolt upon him, "unless it is that

you have other views for Mill—Miss Lisdale ; and, if it is so, may I ask whether her opinion on the matter agrees with your own.”

“I think I have brought my daughter up too carefully for that not to be the case, if, as you imagine, I had views for her opposed to yours. Millicent, of course, would not presume to think for herself on such a matter. But as things are, the only obstacles are those which have arisen from yourself. It’s very painful to speak of them ; I regret very much that you had not chosen to discuss this matter with Mr. Rushington. There is so much in it that is unpleasant for a lady even to allude to. Surely, Mr. Dale, it ought to be enough for me to mention Mrs. Thornton, without entering into any further, and most unpleasant, details.”

And Mrs. Rushington looked as if Mrs. Thornton’s name was indeed painful for her to utter, and as if all her sense of pro-

priety and delicacy was wounded by the necessity of such utterance ; but Audley was still in the dark. Mrs. Thornton had not returned to her home—that he had ascertained ; and Mr. Thornton was still seriously ill, but he had been too short a time in barracks, and seen too little, since his return to them, of his brother officers, to learn how her continued disappearance was likely to affect him.

“ I do n’t understand,” he began ; “ will you have the goodness to explain ?”

Mrs. Rushington looked aghast. “ Explanations are impossible !” she said, and rose, as if further continuance in the same air with such an evil-doer was not to be endured. Audley rose too.

“ You must not go yet, Mrs. Rushington. This is much too serious a matter for me to consent to have it passed over like this. However painful you may find it, I must beg of you to tell me a little more.”

“That is quite out of the question,” said Mrs. Rushington, freezingly. “It is a matter which no lady can discuss with a gentleman.”

“That is to say, that being a lady, you are privileged to stab me to the heart, and decline to give your reasons for so doing. Would you let me see Miss Lisdale? Surely if she knows of this—”

“But she does not know, Mr. Dale,” said Mrs. Rushington, looking as if he had outraged every maternal feeling. “Do you think it possible that I should allow such a matter to reach her ears? or that it is fit that any girl, brought up with the slightest regard to propriety, should know this story? I should be shocked if Millicent had the slightest idea of it. It is on that account that I shall not even acquaint her with your proposals. She would, of course, be guided by my ideas as to the propriety of declining them, but still she

might ask me why I was so decided in doing so, and what could I tell her? Gracious heavens! do you suppose I could contaminate my child by the recital of the reasons which have compelled me to do so? That that unhappy woman should ever have visited at this house, have associated with my daughter, have been allowed to co-operate with her in her various little schemes of charitable usefulness, is painful enough, but that Millicent should ever know her in her true character, is not to be thought of."

"I suppose you mean Mrs. Thornton, when you speak of that unhappy woman?" said Audley. "Why she is unhappy, I know no more than you do. I think my denial of any such knowledge ought to be enough."

"Mr. Dale, we *can't* talk upon this matter; it ought never to have been broached," said Mrs. Rushington, and

Audley certainly agreed with her there. "Will you allow me to wish you good-day, and to suggest that just for the present we cannot hope to have the pleasure of seeing you much at Beechside."

Then a bell was rung, Mrs. Rushington's fingers extended so as just to touch Audley's hand, and he found himself outside the villa, and pacing moodily along the sea shore, in its front, with the pleasant feeling that he had been turned out, or something very like it, from the home that held Milly Lisdale.

CHAPTER VI.

UNLUCKY AUDLEY DALE.

AUDLEY DALE walked on in a very different frame of mind to that in which he had entered Beechside, and it was just as well that there were very few persons on the sands to notice his altered looks, or to make their comments upon them. Wearmouth was becoming rapidly deserted by its summer and autumnal visitors. The east wind, as it blew over the long wild Denes, seemed to drive them before it, and even the residents preferred the more sheltered streets to the Parade or the Pier, now there were no fresh faces, or

new dresses, to be seen on either, and no other excitement to be looked for than that of being blown off their feet, or deluged with the salt spray, that at every gust came dashing in.

Nobody met him to see how miserable he was ; but indeed he was too miserable even to be glad of that. What did it all mean—this foolish woman's talk ? Was she really in earnest ? Could any scandal possibly have arisen from the frank, open, friendship which had subsisted between Mrs. Thornton and himself ? The whole thing seemed so utterly absurd. On his part there had never been even that semblance of passion which induces a flirtation. Even if Milly had not been in the case, Mrs. Thornton was the last woman he would ever have fallen in love with. He liked her so much that anything else was out of the question. How could this ridiculous story have arisen ? Had Clare set it on

foot? Surely, in her position, she would be powerless enough to work him such a piece of mischief as that. Who would believe her if she told such a tale, thought Audley, forgetting that it is the things that creep whose venom we have most to dread. No, it could not be Clare. Who, then? Possibly Mrs. Rushington's own imaginings. "She always was jealous of the poor creature," said Audley; "so I believe were most of the women about her, with the exception of Milly."

He went on, after a bit, savagely, taking long strides, and treading down the sand, as if so he would tread down all the scandal and stories which had connected his name with Mrs. Thornton's. "If I can only get hold of Milly, in spite of her mother," he thought, "I'll soon make everything clear. To think of this confounded rubbish turning up now, when we might have had everything straight and clear.

Whatever will my father say ? Ten to one he'll believe this *canard*, if it reaches his ears. I do believe I'm the most unlucky dog in all creation. I no sooner get out of one hobble, than I'm safe to be drawn into another ! And not my fault at all, that I can see. It's sheer ill luck, every bit of it," said Audley, setting down to his evil stars the results of his own folly in being led astray six years ago by Charlotte Clare's unlovely wiles, and the evil that had arisen from a later, and less culpable weakness, in suffering his friendship for Mrs. Thornton to take a shape that to censorious eyes must appear, at the least, questionable. It was all ill-luck, every bit of it, and his own imprudence had no more to do with it than has the unpleasant harvest we all of us have to reap, at one time or another, with the seeds we have scattered broadcast, without a thought of the crop into which they would mature.

He had walked past the town, past the Rectory of St. Hilda, and was looking up to the house—which to-day, with its few creepers nipped by the east wind, and its stunted trees already leafless and shivering, like sentient things, in the bleak gale, looked colder, blacker, more unhomelike, than ever—and thinking of its absent mistress, with perhaps as much anger as pity, for “why on earth had she bolted and got him into this mess?” when two voices struck on his ear—Beatey Layton’s and Milly Lisdale’s. They had been to the Rectory to inquire after Mr. Thornton, and were leaving it by the side path, which brought them down to the beach, preferring, bleak as the day was, to go that way home to walking through the narrow streets and lanes of that end of the town into which the front entrance would have brought them.

He saw them before they perceived him. Milly’s sensible, shrewd little face was look-

ing paler and graver than its wont. Beatey was much the same as ever. In another second she espied him, and willing to do as she would be done by, drew back, so that he should meet Milly comparatively alone.

Miss Lisdale gave a little start when she perceived her lover. Then she put out her hand, frankly, but still with the same air of gravity which he had noticed as overspreading her face. On his side, he was a little awkward and restrained. What did she believe of him? Had her mother influenced her? No. The idea of Mrs. Rushington influencing any one would be too absurd. But, still, Milly might have heard this abominable scandal from other quarters. He would not keep long in suspense. He would know the worst or the best at once. He turned back and walked by her side, Beatey following at a discreet distance.

“Milly,” he said, “I’ve been to your

mother, just now, to tell her that my best hopes were fixed on making you my wife ; and that my father was prepared to do all that lay in his power to facilitate matters. I'm sorry to say I've had rather a strange reception. Some one has been poisoning her ears with a scandal, which is so absurd that, if it were not for its effect on her, I should have thought no one in their senses would have believed it, and she has almost given me my *congé* ! Pleasant, when everything, at last, appeared to be such smooth sailing. We shall have to wait, now, till she is disabused of this absurd idea, and heaven knows how long it will take to do that. Have you any notion what it means ? What is the story she has got hold of ; and what on earth have I got to do with Mrs. Thornton's quarrelling with her husband, and running away to her friends, which, I suppose, is about the state of the case ?"

He was so angry with everybody—Mrs. Thornton included—that he would not even allow her to be an involuntary agent in her own disappearance. “Nothing had happened to her that day at the Fort,” he argued. “It was not to be supposed that she would have stayed there too long, knowing so well when the tide would come in. Besides, she could easily mount high enough to be out of danger. No, she must have had a tiff with Thornton, which was not to be wondered at, and gone home to give him a fright—a stupid thing to do, on her own account, as she would find whenever she came back to Wearmouth, and sure to set people’s tongues going. But why on earth could she not have managed better, so that they should not be set going about him?”

Of course Milly knew the story, her mother’s belief in her paradisiacal innocence notwithstanding. She coloured as he ques-

tioned her. If she did not believe in his guilt, still the rumours that had spread about were enough to make her uneasy, and how should she tell the man before her of what he was accused? And yet, if she did not tell him, how could he clear himself, if such clearing were possible? He put his own construction on her silence.

“You don’t believe this lie, Milly? Whatever it is, if it means that I have anything to do with the disappearance of this poor lady—that in any way I have wronged Thornton, or been false to you—it is a lie, foul and complete. I only wish a man had set it going, and I might trace it to him, and ram it down his throat.”

“You would have enough to do,” said Milly, “for every man and every woman in the place seems to believe it.”

“Not every woman—not you, Milly?”

“I would not have believed it—I would not have thought any ill of you—nor even

of her, who was my friend, had it not been for that letter which you made so light of the night of the ball. To think that she should write such a thing, or you give her cause to do so !”

“ *She* write it ! she write an anonymous letter ! Mrs. Thornton is the last woman in the world to stoop to such a meanness,” said Audley angrily, believing what he said, and quite deceived in his belief, for Mrs. Thornton would have written an anonymous letter if she had thought she would have benefited herself or a friend thereby, and injured no one, just in the same spirit that she would have told an untruth, if she had believed that any good end would be achieved by her doing so. Her code of honour was, perhaps, as different from that of Audley Dale—gentleman and soldier—as her moral standard was from that of her husband—priest and Christian.

“ If she did n’t write it, it is strange

that it should be on note-paper exactly like that which she uses commonly ; that the handwriting should be so similar to what hers would be, if she attempted to disguise it ; and that on the envelope, now I have scraped away the sealing-wax with which it was secured, I should find her monogram," said Milly sadly. "I didn't look at all these little matters when the note first came to me, but, to tell you the plain truth, I was not satisfied with the explanation you gave me, when I told you of the letter—to say the least, you were confused and incoherent. I should not have thought it possible before that night, that I could harbour such thoughts of her or of you. Others had said strange things of her—yes, and of your friendship with her ; I would not, as I thought then, insult you or her by harbouring them for a second. I meant to be kind to her ; I believe I always was kind ; I thought she was a friendless

woman in a strange place, and that people, not understanding, judged her hardly—and all the time——”

“Well, and all the time,” said Audley fiercely, “all the time, do you mean to say that she or I were the false unworthy creatures your mother, in her wisdom, would make us out. Whatever she might say or do, Milly, I credited you with at least a grain of sense, as well as something like Christian charity.”

He was more angry than ever, perhaps because he was beginning to feel himself more and more in the wrong. All that Milly said, pointed to Clare as the authoress of the letter she had received, and to his own past folly, as deepening, if it had not originated, this miserable entanglement, and he wanted to burst the toils in which it had involved him, with a high, fierce hand, instead of patiently and humbly unravelling them. If he would even now have told

Milly the whole truth, she would have believed him in this other matter, but he could not bring himself to the humiliation—nay, he was not sure that she would believe him. “She was set against him,” he said to himself, “and even if she did credit his story, it would not make matters any better—rather worse indeed. Would not his past folly make the sin of which he was accused at present, seem all the more probable?”

“Do you mean to say that you believe this?” he continued fiercely, “that you can entertain such thoughts of the woman you called your friend, to say nothing of myself? If you do, Milly, your friendship is as little worth as——” and then he paused, scarcely feeling disposed to wind up the sentence with a suitable peroration. Milly did it for him.

“As my love, I suppose you would say; is that what you mean, Audley? Well, I

won't pretend to withdraw it, I can't give and take back quite so easily, but I think, till this matter is cleared up, we had better remain as we were before—before—anything was said to make a difference. I don't accuse you—I do n't accuse any one, but I think it is only due to myself, that till this story is set right, my name should not be connected with yours. If you wish matters to be different, surely you can offer some solution of all these mysteries, which to me are inexplicable."

Milly spoke with a little quiet dignity that sat very well on her. She had suffered a great deal ; right or wrong, she had believed in Mrs. Thornton, and friendship to Milly was a very serious thing. It cost her almost as much to believe that her friend was unworthy as her lover. She had fought very hard against this belief. It was not till one day in a fit of restless curiosity, she removed the sealing wax from the

envelope of the anonymous letter which had been sent her, that the sight of Mrs. Thornton's monogram made her misgivings take a new and more tangible form. If, after all, the idle stories which had been spread about, and which had linked Mrs. Thornton's name so much with Audley Dale's, should have some foundation in them ! Why had she gone in that strange way ?—just too at the very time when Audley had been summoned from Wearmouth ? and why had Audley hesitated and equivocated about that letter ? She had not liked his manner at the time ; the more she thought of it, the less she liked it now—it was almost incredible—the whole story was one that it was so difficult to reconcile with what she knew of these two, and yet there were the hard bare facts, whose ugliness it was impossible to explain away—let Audley do it if he could.

“ And supposing it is all as great a mys-

tery to me as it is to you," said Audley, "what then?"

"Then things must be just as they are till one way or another the mystery is cleared up," said Milly.

That was all he could bring her to say. She was very quietly resolute in this, and when Milly had settled on any one thing as right and best to be done, it was impossible to turn her from doing it, and therefore Audley Dale, when he left her, felt that he was as far as ever from bringing his wooing to a successful end, and went off bemoaning his ill luck more hopelessly than ever.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW CLARE WAITED.

WEEK after week had gone on, and Harold Thornton still lay hanging between life and death. Now and then something of semi-consciousness returned. He knew where he was—knew that Clare was in attendance upon him, and that he was ill ; then he remembered his wife, and the remembrance had, at least, nothing of remorse in it. As he had said over and over again, what else was there for him to do ? How could they go on as they were ? How could he let her live to sink lower and lower into infamy ? And of the justice of

her punishment, and his own right, as her lord and ruler, to mete it out, he had never entertained a doubt. It was over ; she was gone. He wished that he had gone with her, but if it was not so ordained, what was there for him but submission to the will that allotted him his work, and said he must remain here to finish it ? Slowly, heavily such thoughts passed through his mind, as thoughts pass through all minds when enfeebled by great illness, and then he lost them altogether, and lapsed into utter forgetfulness, letting the days and weeks go by one after the other, while it was just a question to Mr. Harben, whether he would ever know what time was again, but would not rather lie there—stranded on Eternity.

Clare did her part by him. Mr. Harben said he had rarely met with so good a nurse. Whatever Clare undertook to do, she did with a certain deft dexterity that

seemed inborn, and her patient did not make many calls upon her self-denial. He was not exacting or troublesome even in illness. She was a light sleeper, and got her fair share of rest in his room, and sat and sewed by the window in the intervals of her ministrations, looking always the same—neat, cool, well-bred, and patient—altogether, in Mr. Harben's opinion, as she was in that of many others, a model young woman of her class. She kept strict watch, though there was little need to do so. Mr. Thornton never again relapsed into delirious talk ; but Clare liked to be on the safe side. There was no knowing when he might do so, and whatever dark secret the Fort held, neither Mr. Harben nor Deb should share with her until such time as it should be a secret no more. She was waiting, she hardly knew for what, but before long, something more than mere gossip and scandal must arise from Mrs.

Thornton's disappearance: the vague rumours would grow into suspicions, and suspicions must rest somewhere, and Audley Dale might find himself in danger of losing more than Miss Lisdale, if he did not take heed.

Sometimes a great wish seized her to go at once to the Fort, and see if it could tell her nothing. Then she trembled and hesitated. It might hold a tenant too ghastly even for her eyes to look upon, unmoved; still, that would hardly have deterred her, only, as she said, it would do no good, and might do harm. There was nothing for her but to wait, and sit in that sick-room, hoping that her patient, for whom, in spite of such hope, she was honestly doing her best, would either linger on in unconsciousness, till that was discovered in the Fort, which would fix suspicion at once on Audley Dale, or die before he was asked how it was his wife had been so long absent from her home.

That was what she was hoping for. If Mr. Thornton recovered before suspicion had ripened into proof, and Audley Dale stood convicted of something far more than the misdeed with which he was now credited, he might, and she believed would, clear him. He might hate the man, consider himself aggrieved by him beyond forgiveness, but he would not let him suffer for a crime he had not committed. He could neither tell a lie nor act one, and in that case he would have to do both. All her hope was that he would succumb to the illness, and yet, in spite of this hope, she was doing her best to bring him through. It was only routine work after all: but still a window left open, a draught omitted, the nourishment prescribed poured anywhere but down the patient's throat, and she would have been pretty well secure. But anything like this Clare would have found it impossible to do.

She had a great idea of keeping on the right side of the law, of sinning after the manner of respectable people. Therefore, she was strictly honest, sober, and discreet, and as to her nursing, it was just a piece of work, and Clare could no more slight it than she could anything else she undertook to do. It would be very hard upon her if Mr. Thornton did get well, but she could no more neglect anything required by the doctor's directions, than she could have put great stitches in her delicate needle-work, or have scorched the fine things that had been given her to iron.

Her spirits rallied wonderfully, and she began to think that, after all, matters were to come home to Mr. Dale, when Mr. Harben one day, after expressing his hearty approval of her care and attention as a nurse, said, that though he believed his patient would pull through, he had serious doubts whether his mind would not be permanently affected.

“There has been a shock to the nervous system, or perhaps less a shock than a long continuous strain. He has been living at high pressure too long, doing the work of half a dozen men, in this parish, and now the reaction has come, and I doubt whether he will ever get over it. Poor fellow! I’ve warned him of it, but he would n’t be warned, and what could one do?”

Then Clare rejoiced, and as she thought of Audley Dale, and all that a little time might bring about, her green eyes brightened with an evil light, and she almost smiled as her needle flew in and out of her work. “It’ll come home to him at last,” she thought, “it’ll come home. But, oh dear! why do n’t some one tell them to go and look in the Fort?”

Then it occurred to her, might she not be that some one? Why could she not tell her story plausibly, and smoothly, and

set people's thoughts going in the right direction. The sooner it was done the better, or else, if the Fort did hold a tenant, the waters that ebbed and flowed within its ruined walls, might wash away all trace and semblance by which whatever ghastly thing was there might be identified as having been the very woman whose disappearance had caused so much wonder. The very day after this thought had occurred to her, she heard something that decided her upon adopting it. Deb, when she brought up her breakfast, was full of some news the milk boy had told her.

“Th’ old Fort on the Denes is like tew come down at last. The sea’s made its way into they places below, where the smugglers used tew stow away their barrels. Heaps o’ stones are gone in, an’ its thort the whole ’ll be topplin’ head foremost afore long. There’s many a murder,

they dew say, been done in the old times there. I reckon they'll find bones or things that'll tell them somethin' o' what's been. I'd like tew go an' hev a look at them, would n't yew, Clare?"

"I do n't think I should," said Clare. "If anything was found, it would n't be a pleasant sight."

"How's the marster?" said Deb, looking at the bed where the master lay, the weakest, most powerless thing in all that house. "Will he ever gotten out of this, dew yew think?"

"I do n't know," said Clare, "Mr. Harben's clever, and I'm doing my best."

"No doubt o' that," said Deb, "I should never ha' thort yew'd ha' had such a good notion o' nussin'. I'd sooner yew than me. It's rare tedious work. I'd laifer dew a month's washin' than be stuck up here for a day."

"Some one must do it," said Clare,

“and Mr. Thornton was always a good master.”

“Well, yes, he wor,” said Deb, thoughtfully, “in his way, just as he wor a good husband, but I’d rather hev one myself that made a little more stir in the place. Squire Jones, now, where I wor before I cum here—lor! what a man he wor for swarin! The least thing that put him out he’d rap out oaths by the dozen. But ’twere on’y his way. We none on us minded him. It kep us alive, yew see, an’ let us know there was a man in th’ house.”

“I wish you would go and see to the beef tea,” said Clare. “Mr. Thornton will want it by eleven. It’s time it was on.”

Away Deb went, and Clare sipped her tea and thought matters over. “It’s time some one went to see what those old stones can tell them,” she thought; “and no one will ever think of it, unless they’re put on

the track." And then she considered how it would be best to put them on it.

"I think I'll write," was the conclusion she came to, at last. "Not in my own name. They'll think more of a letter without any signature to it than with only mine. But it shall be my own handwriting. I may have to own the letter, and find it best to do so. I can easily say I found this one of Audley Dale's, and that set me to doing it. I should like him to know, when it comes to the end, who brought matters about."

She ate her breakfast composedly, then saw to her patient, after which, as he dozed off, she opened her neat little writing desk, and sat down to it. Her epistle cost her a little trouble—she was not a quick penwoman—but it was well-spelt, and well-written, and to this effect :—

"SIR,—

"If you cause a search to be insti-

tuted under the stones which have given way of the old Fort you may possibly find something which may tell you why Mrs. Thornton has left her home. The last day she was in it she quitted it for the purpose of keeping an appointment within the ruins.

“Yours obediently,

“ONE WHO CAN TELL YOU MORE
WHEN THE RIGHT TIME COMES.”

After a while Deb came up with the beef tea, and Clare asked her if she would remain with Mr. Thornton after he had taken it, while she ran out for half-an-hour. “I’m quite faint for want of a little fresh air. I won’t be longer than the half-hour; and Mr. Harben, I know, will not call till the afternoon. He’ll be quiet enough. You’ll only have to sit still and keep the fire in.”

“Do n’t be longer,” said Deb. “I shall be nigh scared to be in the house alone.”

Clare promised she would not, and went her way. She posted her letter. It was too important to be trusted in the hands of either butcher or baker to do so; and, besides, they would wonder why she was writing to the Mayor. Then she took a little turn by the sea side, and the keen east wind seemed to have a wonderful effect in freshening her intellect and strengthening her nerves, for she came back to the sick room with her plans pretty well matured, and took her place by the window, as usual, feeling quite satisfied that what she had done that morning would be likely to set such an investigation afoot as might make Audley Dale repent the manner in which he had met her claims.

Indeed the note she had written produced something of the effect that a bomb-shell might have done, thrown into a peaceful town. Of course Mrs. Thornton's disappearance, and Mr. Thornton's illness, had

caused a great deal of excitement and gossip. Every one blamed her and pitied him; but it seemed now as if, after all, there might be more of a tragedy connected with her fate than had been imagined. The Mayor—Mr. Goderich—a well-to-do brewer, who had met Mrs. Thornton occasionally, and had formed his own surmises—not a bit more charitable than other people's—respecting her absence—was puzzled by this letter. What traces could there be found of the missing lady, under the stones of the old Fort, but such as would show that a more serious crime had been committed than had been dreamed of! He felt shy of acting on his own responsibility, but promptly called a meeting of his brother magistrates, and they were unanimous in agreeing that the letter was at least deserving of attention, and that the stones which had fallen in of the old Fort should be removed, and a search instituted

beneath them, and over the whole of the Fort, but especially the lower portion.

The meeting was held with closed doors, and the worthy magistrates intended all to be done secretly; but when was secrecy ever observed in a country town? Every one knew what was on foot as soon as the labourers moved off with pick-axes and shovels towards the Fort; and Deb, to whom, the next morning, the milkman brought the fresh news, came rushing up with it to Clare.

“They ar’ goin’ tew look for the missus! —they are goin’ tew look for her,” she said, excitedly; “an’, of all places in th’ world, under th’ stones of th’ old Fort. Whatever set them on tew thinkin’ o’ that? Of all unlikely places in the world that’s the last a gay body like her would go tew. So lonesome, and not a soul to speak tew, or tew see her.”

“Lonely places are handy ones at times,”

said Clare, looking out of the window, that Deb might not see she was changing colour. Just now she was afraid even of her eyes, dull as they generally were. "If Mrs. Thornton had any one she wanted to see or to speak to without being noticed, the Fort would be convenient."

"Lor, Clare! do n't go for tew think o' such wickedness," said Deb. "The missus was a rare lively one, an' liked her pleasure—why should n't she? The good-looking ones mostly dew. It's the plain sort, like you and I, that hev the gift o' stoppin' at home; but I'd never believe *that* of her."

"The truth may come out now," said Clare.

"I hope it won't," retorted Deb, "if the truth means that the dead are tew be worse thought on when they're gone than when they were with us. An' dead the missus must be by this if they find her under the stones of th' old Fort."

Deb began to cry, rather noisily, and Clare stopped her.

“ You had better go down, or you’ll wake Mr. Thornton. Besides, I’ve had a bad night with him, and I should be glad of a cup of tea.”

Deb went down, rather angrily muttering, as she went, that “ some folks would take their four meals reglar, an’ keep themselves spick as a new pin, if the whole world was a comin’ to an end the next day,” and then she got Clare her tea, and tried to take some breakfast herself, but broke down in the middle of it. This was the first time in all the household troubles that Deb’s appetite had given way ; but the thought of her mistress lying stiff and cold in the old Fort, “ while every one was flytin’ on her, an’ givin’ her the worst names they could,” was too much for Deb. She had no heart even to scrub, and scrubbing was generally Deb’s panacea and safety-

valve. She went through the day listlessly and wearily, wondering when it would come to an end, and what news there would be before nightfall, while Clare sat upstairs, sewing, and tending her patient mechanically, and wondering, too, whether indeed the Fort would give that up which for the last five weeks she had felt convinced it held.

“They’ll find it if they look long enough,” she said.

With all her stoicism, Clare could not resist the influence of the day. Should she learn before it closed that the woman who had mocked and taunted her—done so far worse than sneer at her servitude, gibe at her for her plain, unlovely face—was now for ever powerless to utter scoff or sneer? That vengeance had been given her, fuller, completer, than she had ever dreamed of—that vengeance, deeper, deadlier still, was within her reach ; vengeance upon the man

who was now ashamed of the folly of his boyhood, which had led him to seek her as his wife.

“Revenge is sweet.” I doubt whether Clare found it so. It was intoxicating, maddening, requiring all her nerve and self-control to keep her moving all day in the same even track—attentive to her patient, who, happily perhaps for him, would have heeded little whether she was attentive or not ; civil to the doctor, and sufficiently calm not to excite Deb’s suspicions. Revenge gave her quite enough to do to-day, without leaving her time to analyze its sweetness.

She could not control her appetite. After all, she was not quite so equal to the consumption of her four meals a day as Deb imagined. When the latter ran up-stairs to fetch down her tray, and saw the food almost untouched, she thought better of Clare. “Yew’re like me—can’t stumick yewr

vittles while you don't no what's goin' on over there. I hev not bin able to git down a bit this day." Then she looked at the unconscious tenant of the bed, and lowered her tone. "It's to be hoped, if they *dew* find what they're lookin' for in the Fort, he'll never live to hear on it."

"I don't think he will," said Clare. "But he's quiet now, an' I was up half the night with him. I think, if you'll go down, I could get a nap in the easy chair, and I'd better, if I can. I might n't have an hour's rest to-night again."

"I'll go," said Deb, "but it's dreadful work in that thar' kitchen all alone, an' they beetles runnin' about as if they thout they'd got it all to theirselves, an' never a missus in the place to hev poison set for them. I never did know such a day. I ain't heart tew dew anythin'. I hev n't even washed up after breakfast, an' it's just as well yew had no stumick for yewr

food—I expect I spoiled they chops in cookin’ of ’em.”

Deb went away—then turned back, with every bit of colour flown from her broad red face. “Do yew think,” she said softly, “if they find her—the missus—they’ll bring her home? I feel as if I must run out, and git clean shet of the place if they’re like to do it. I could n’t stand that no how.”

“I do n’t think that’s likely,” said Clare. “But go down now. If you did but know how much I want a little sleep!”

But she did not sleep when Deb left the room. She kept quite quiet, trying to think, and plan, and settle, what she should say, and how she should say it, when the time came. But she could decide upon nothing. Her head was burning, her brain whirling. Everything seemed one vast confusion. She could arrange nothing, and at last she gave up the attempt to do so in despair.

"I'll let it all be," she said, "till the time comes, and then, I've very little doubt but I shall find all I've need to say. The words will come when I want them."

Then she leaned back in her easy chair, and, if she did not sleep, rested, sitting quiet and immovable for above an hour, letting both mind and body cease from working, and at the end of that time Deb came up, with her round eyes wide open in their horror, her great face looking like the full moon in its round whiteness, and her sturdy frame trembling with agitation.

"They ha' gotten her!" she said hoarsely; "they ha' gotten her! Bob Trivet called, as he said he would, tew let me know. They ha' gotten her from under the stones an' the rubbish, with scarce a bit o' likeness tew a human thing left in her, an' they hev' taken her to the 'King's Arms,' to wait the inquest, an' try an' see who put her

thar. Thar'll be willful murder against some one, I'm thinkin'. She was never a one to lay down her life of her own will; an' I hope, whoever's done it, they'll bring it home to him. 'Murder will out,' they say, an' that's a rare true word. They ha' gotten her, they ha' gotten her, an' I shall pray night an' day it won't be long before they find the wretch that sent her to her end."

"They'll find him," said Clare, "as they found her, if they only look long enough."

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT CLARE WAITED FOR.

THROUGH all Wearmouth a horrified whisper ran, when it was heard that something which was said to be all that remained of the wife of the Rector of St. Hilda had been taken to the "King's Arms," and was there awaiting an inquest. Why had she gone to the Old Fort? What could have taken her there? and how, if she had gone, did death in so fearful a form overtake her? From under the stones, which had fallen in at the lower part of the Old Fort, something crushed out of nearly all semblance to humanity, had been

extracted. That it was a woman the dress showed at once ; that it was Mrs. Thornton was a conclusion readily arrived at by those who had gone there to search for her.

She could not have come by her death fairly. That was the general opinion. But there was no question of robbery, for the poor, mutilated form had still its wedding-ring and rich gold keeper on, and round the neck the chain, with the watch attached, that she was in the habit of wearing in life. If she had been killed for the purpose of plunder, her murderer would have made secure of these.

Who, then, could have slain her ? She was a woman without a single enemy. People had found fault with her dress, with her manners, as unsuitable to her position ; but with the lower class her frank good-nature had made her popular. Not one of them would have injured her ; while, amongst her equals, it was not to be believed that

the most virulent of her detractors would have dealt with her after this fashion.

It might be an accident, but it did not look like it. She must have fallen with outstretched arms, just as one would fall who had been struck down by a blow from behind ; and on the back of the skull there was a fracture, which the medical men who examined her deposed afterwards must have been inflicted by some blunt instrument or thick cudgel, but which would not have been caused by the stones falling on her. Indeed, it was singular that none of them had fallen on the head. The body was crushed and almost shapeless, and the face was scarred, and swollen with the salt water in which it had lain, so that all likeness to its former self was gone ; but the back of the head had received no other injury than that one blow, which, however, the medical men said was in itself sufficient to cause death.

This came out at the inquest the next day. Deb and Clare had been summoned to it as the servants of the deceased lady, and likely to have some knowledge of the last moments she spent in her home. Deb was in a fright at the idea of going. She knew nothing; could say nothing, and it was a rare hard thing to have to speak up before so many people. Clare was outwardly calm and self-possessed as ever. She gave the woman whom Mr. Harben had sent in to take temporary charge of her master, strict injunctions respecting him, measured his medicine out herself, and saw that everything was straight and trim in the sick room before she left it, and then went to the "King's Arms," looking as neat and staid a damsel as ever made a reluctant appearance in public.

The moment she entered the room she glanced round to see who was present.

Audley Dale was there, looking scared and horrified. He had never dreamed of anything like this. The more he had thought over matters, the more it had seemed impossible, that any harm could have occurred to Mrs. Thornton within the Fort. She must have gone away of her own accord—perhaps quarrelled with her husband, and, not having heard of his illness, had not thought fit to return, but was waiting for him to make overtures for reconciliation, quite regardless of the misconstruction that might be put upon her disappearance. This had been his solution of matters, and it had left him much more concerned for himself than for Mrs. Thornton; and now this awful tragedy had come to light, and instead of being the heroine of a commonplace domestic quarrel, here she was—the best friend he had ever known—the kind, good-natured creature, who had been so ready and prompt with her sympathy and aid,

stricken down in her very prime—murdered, so the talk ran, by some coward hand.

He could have wept like a woman when he first heard of it. She had gone there out of sheer kindness to him, and then this awful fate had overtaken her. The poor dead creature whom they had all maligned and exposed, whose name they had linked so cruelly with his, had cleared herself at last. Would they feel a little shame, a little regret for all the cruel lies they had said. Even, Milly, her friend, had thought so evilly of her. It was to be hoped she would repent of her injustice now. “Let her!” he said with great bitterness, “she deserves to suffer!” He could not forgive Milly yet, with that poor dead woman lying there, of whom so causelessly she had thought such evil things.

Clare and Deb had been summoned not merely to state what they could of their late mistress’s last movements, but that they

might identify her. It was perhaps just as well that Deb did not know this would be required of her when she started, otherwise it might have been difficult to induce her to come. Owing to some oversight on the part of the officials, Clare and she had been shown into the club-room at once when they arrived at the "King's Arms" without being taken to make the necessary identification. This being ascertained, they were removed to do so. Deb shrieked with horror when desired to look on what it was believed had been her mistress, declared the sight would freeze and kill her, then after much persuasion gave one hurried look, and went into hysterics, which were heard even in the club-room.

Clare's pale face turned a deadlier white than ever, but she went up and looked at the ghastly thing stretched out before her, then gave a slight start and peered more closely, took up even the long black hair,

still damp, and smelling of the tide, which night and morning for the last five weeks had washed over it, then looked at the dress, and examined with a curious intentness the under linen. Then, without a word, as if overcome by the sight, she motioned the officials to lead her away, and was taken back into the club-room, whither Deb followed as soon as sufficiently composed to do so.

The medical men were giving their evidence when Clare re-entered there. She listened attentively ; when they spoke of their conviction that the deceased must have been struck down by a blow from behind, her eyes flashed fire, but as if she knew that their glances were not to be trusted, she kept her eye-lids down decorously. Audley Dale was seen to start and lean forward at this part of the evidence—evidently labouring under great excitement. He had some difficulty to keep

from breaking in with a suggestion that as murder had certainly been done, the county ought to offer a liberal reward for the apprehension of the murderer. As it was, the start he gave, and his only half suppressed exclamation were sufficient to attract all eyes to him, and cause people to remember how his name had been connected with Mrs. Thornton's in her lifetime.

The next witness was Deb. She was still excited and hysterical, and had very little to say. She had recognized her former mistress in the body she had just seen ; was sure of it by the clothes, especially the hat. It was just her height and figure. The hair too was hers ; Mrs. Thornton had wonderful hair—she had often said so to Clare—and here the witness broke down, and was again overcome ; rallying, however, presently, they went on with her examination. She had seen very little of her mistress the last day she was at home. She

seemed very tired after the ball—was surprised at her going out—no one came to the house that day, no one that she was aware of went out with her mistress—had no notion where she was going, or whether she expected any one to meet her.

There was not much to be got out of Deb. She herself was glad when her examination was over, and sat down by Clare, who was now called forward in her turn.

She was a striking contrast to Deb, who had come there glowing in her Sunday finery, and who had stood up trembling and palpitating all over, with her broad red face all blurred and swollen by her recent fit of crying. Clare's dress was propriety itself ; she had a neat black silk, and a little white bonnet ; no lady could have worn better fitting gloves than she did, and her composed manner and correct tones, were wonderfully opposed to Deb's, who had been hardly able to get her words out,

and had said what she did say, in the bad provincial dialect which always grew broader whenever she was excited. People looked curiously at Clare—she appeared so much above her station—and were prepared to listen attentively to whatever she had to say. The first question was as to the identification of her mistress, and here Clare's evidence tallied with Deb's. She believed the body in the adjoining room to be that of Mrs. Thornton; it was impossible to recognize the face, but the dress and ornaments were certainly hers—the hat and jacket, too, were those in which Mrs. Thornton had gone out the last day she left her house.

Here one of the jurors asked a question. Had the witness observed the feet of the person supposed to be Mrs. Thornton? Were the boots that it had on such as a lady in her position would be likely to wear?

There was a little stir at this remark. Audley Dale turned and looked eagerly at the juryman who had put it. If after all this should not be Mrs. Thornton! If all their suspicions, terror, and excitement had been for nothing, and some nameless wanderer had appropriated the sympathy which should have been given to the wife of the Rector of St. Hilda! Two or three of the jury-men observed that they had remarked the boots—they were thick, and clumsily made, not at all the boots that a lady would be likely to wear. Audley Dale grew full of hope. He remembered well how daintily shod Mrs. Thornton's feet had always been. He would have liked to ask permission to view the corpse supposed to be hers; and then a sickening horror came over him. If this should be she! foul, ghastly, and decaying, the sight would be too horrible. He had as much physical bravery as most Englishmen of his age and class possess,

but to look on the horror that adjoining chamber held, and ask himself if that, indeed, was Henrietta Thornton, who had been his friend, was more than he had nerve for. He turned pale at the very thought ; Clare saw that he did so, and so did others. But he was watching Clare, too, in his turn. After all, who could answer this question as correctly as she could. He waited eagerly for her answer, and she gave it.

“ I noticed the boots particularly. Mrs. Thornton was in the habit of wearing such occasionally ; not often, but if she went out after dark along the seashore. I helped her dress for her walk that afternoon. At the time I wondered at her wearing such boots, but not afterwards, when I found, in the course of the day, where she had gone. I have taken notice of every garment that the body in the next room has on, and I

believe it, as I said, to be that of my late mistress, Mrs. Thornton."

As she spoke, she turned involuntarily from the coroner, towards Audley Dale, so that she seemed rather to be addressing him than speaking to that officer. Every one present felt that her words were meant more for him than for any one beside. He felt it himself—felt, too, he knew not why, that those words had another and deeper meaning than that which met the ear. He turned paler still. It was as if he had heard Henrietta Thornton's death bell tolled, but his own knell mingling with it.

Every one felt, when Clare had concluded, that there could be no doubt but that the dead woman found in the Fort was Mrs. Thornton ; but why had the witness thought that Audley Dale was so especially concerned to know the fact ? Clare's examination went on.

“Mrs. Thornton had not told her where she was going. She believed that Mr. Thornton did not know. She found it out afterwards, from a note which she picked up, and which Mrs. Thornton had dropped. She read it, yes, she read it, because——” and then the witness stopped, and seemed hardly to like to give her reasons, but at last, as if feeling that the truth must be told, went on—“she read it because things had been going on in the house, of which Mr. Thornton, she believed, was perfectly ignorant, but which had made her uncomfortable, and at times inclined to give up her situation, and she felt curious to see, when this note came in her way, from Mr. Audley Dale to Mrs. Thornton, what was in it. That was the note which told her where she had gone that afternoon. Should she read it, or would the coroner like to have it?”

Then she produced the hurried scrawl

which Audley Dale, in his haste, had sent to Mrs. Thornton, and handed it to the jury as desired. The coroner and they read it, and then looked ominously at Audley Dale, who stood there, amazed beyond expression that his name should thus be mixed up in the matter, but without a thought of the deadlier evil impending over him.

Things had taken an awkward turn. The coroner felt it. The next question he had to put was one that must appear to criminate Mr. Audley Dale, and the coroner had naturally a much greater reluctance to criminate a gentleman in Audley's position, and an officer in the army, than he would have had to impugn any one in a lower sphere ; but the mayor, who was present, now asked leave to put a question to the witness, and, producing the anonymous note he had received, asked whether she had sent him that. Clare looked at it, and

then, without a moment's hesitation, answered in the affirmative.

"I wish I had done it sooner," she said in at one so quiet and modest, that every one present felt convinced that in writing that anonymous letter, she had only acted under a painful necessity. "I felt all along, from the first night when Mrs. Thornton did not come home, that something had happened to her at the Fort. If Mr. Thornton had been in any state to have been spoken to, I would have told him and shown him the note. As it was, I thought it better to wait till he recovered, and then tell him everything ; but time went on, and he seemed to be getting worse instead of better, and when I heard of the Fort falling in, I felt as if something must be done—it was impossible for me to keep silence longer. I would have signed the note with my own name," said Clare, apologizing to the mayor, with a politeness that impressed

him very favourably ; “ but I thought that coming from a person in my station, it might not meet with so much attention as if you were unacquainted with the writer.”

Audley Dale, standing there, felt as if a net was being drawn tighter and tighter round him. People looked strangely, worse than coldly, upon him. It was all true—everything was true that the woman standing there was saying—and yet he knew and felt that she was swearing his life away, and that his innocence was likely to avail him little with such a foe. The coroner continued :—

“ Had Mrs. Thornton’s disappearance anything to do with Mr. Thornton’s illness ?”

“ Nothing,” in Clare’s opinion. “ He did not know where she had gone, and so could not have been angry with her for going to the Fort. She supposed he had been on one of his long rounds that afternoon, and over-tired himself. He was

always doing so. Mr. Harben had often warned him against it. He was too tired when he came in to ask for Mrs. Thornton. He had sometimes come home like that before, but never so thoroughly exhausted. She believed, and so she knew did Mr. Harben, that he had never recovered from an illness which he had had at the end of the summer. He would not give in then, and lay by, as Mr. Harben had told him he should do, but had gone on working ever since, as if nothing ailed him. He was too tired to eat, but went up to bed at once, and the next morning he was quite unconscious, and in a low fever. He had remained in that state ever since."

"Did Mr. and Mrs. Thornton live happily together?"

"Well, that was hard to say. They never quarrelled, that she was aware of; but still, as far as she could judge, they did not seem to agree too well. Mrs.

Thornton thought of nothing but her pleasure. Mr. Thornton, she fancied, would have liked her to look a little more to the parish. He was so wrapped up in it. The poor must have missed him dreadfully in his illness. But still Mrs. Thornton and he never had words, and perhaps it might be only her fancy that they did not agree too well."

"Was Mr. Dale a frequent visitor at the Rectory?"

The witness gave a slight smile, but it had the appearance of an involuntary one. "Very--especially in Mr. Thornton's absence."

"Did these visits lead to the unpleasantness which she had imagined existed between Mr. and Mrs. Thornton?"

"They could hardly have done that: Mr. Thornton knew so little of them. Indeed, perhaps it was more her own fancy than anything else about Mr. and Mrs. Thornton not being quite happy together.

She supposed she must sometimes have thought so, because they were not like minded."

"Mr. Thornton knew nothing of Mrs. Thornton's going to the Fort?"

"She did not believe that he did. Mrs. Thornton seldom told him where she was going. He left the house a little while after she did, looking much as usual. But he had been ailing so much for some time past that she was not at all surprised to see him return as exhausted as he did."

There seemed little further to ask the witness. Things looked bad for Audley Dale, but there was no positive evidence of his criminality. He might not have gone to the Fort after all. The jury looked at each other puzzled and uncertain. In their hearts they believed that Audley Dale knew something of Mrs. Thornton's death, but they had no legal evidence of the fact. More was forthcoming, however.

Three men now presented themselves to be sworn as witnesses. They thought they had something to tell of Mrs. Thornton. One was the shrimper who had seen her enter the Fort on that eventful afternoon, and Mr. Audley Dale leave it. His testimony as to the evident perturbation of Mr. Dale, which at this little distance of time he made the most of, was, every one present thought, conclusive. If he had found the poor lady lying murdered then, would it not have been more natural for him to have given the alarm, and sent justice at once after her murderers, than to have hurried from the spot, as if hastening from the sight of the victim he had destroyed?

When the shrimper spoke of the "bit o' lace" that he had seen in Mr. Dale's hand "looking like a thing ladies wear," there was a thrill through the Court. Clare was asked if her mistress did wear anything of the kind, and answered in the affirmative. She had on

a lace cravat, with long ends, the shape and size of the one she—Clare—now wore. Her mistress had kindly allowed her to take the pattern of it; and, as she spoke, Clare unfastened her own, and held it loosely in her hand—quietly, and as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do, but with such dramatic effect that the shrinker cried impetuously, “That’s how it wor! That’s how he held it! Seemed to me at the time he held it as if he might ha’ taken it off some one’s neck that he’d been nigh throttlin’”——

“There was no need to throttle, if he struck her down with a stick,” said the juror who had made the observation about the boots; but no one paid any attention to this remark. The tide was setting in steadily against Audley Dale.

After a little hesitation the coroner decided that a search should be made at once in Mr. Dale’s apartments, to see if the lace

cravat was there, or anything else that might throw light on the matter. He, himself must be detained, at least till this inquiry was over, and the police were directed to proceed directly to his apartments, and make search.

Audley Dale flushed with anger. To have the mere possibility admitted of his being a criminal, and a criminal of so deep a dye, was something almost incredible in its absurdity! But to have his rooms invaded, his drawers and desk ransacked and spied into by rude hands and vulgar eyes, was something that roused the patrician element in him to its fiercest. He woke up out of his usual languid gentleness, much as he might have done at the call to battle, and surveying the officials with ineffable contempt, observed, "Stubbs, my man, has the keys of my drawers. Unless you think it necessary to gratify your curiosity by going over everything they

contain, you will find the article you are sent for in a small box in the left hand drawer of the wardrobe in my bedroom."

This outburst did him no good. They set him down as defying the law in his insolence. Coroner and jury alike felt themselves aggrieved by his contemptuous tone, and the still more contemptuous manner with which he sat with folded arms, and watched the proceedings, with as much apparent nonchalance as if they did not affect him in the least.

Then the two fishermen gave their evidence, as to the cry for help they had heard, proceeding from the Fort, that afternoon. It was after four o'clock, they were sure of that,—that is, some time after the hour at which Audley Dale had appointed to meet Mrs. Thornton at the Fort—but it was before half-past five, the time at which, as nearly as he could remember, the shrimp had seen Mr. Dale leave the Fort. The

conclusion was inevitable, or seemed so to every one present, that that cry had been uttered while Audley Dale was in the Fort.

After this there was a pause ; there was nothing further to be said or done till it was ascertained whether or not the cravat would be produced, but every one was drawing his own conclusions, framing his own theory of the matter ; and on the whole, with a few slight variations, each person's theory was pretty much the same. Audley Dale had grown weary of the woman he had wronged, she had chafed him with her jealousy, or her importunities, and in a fit of passion he had struck her down. That was the most merciful theory ; the other was, that he had drawn her to the Fort with the intention of luring her to her end. But every one was unanimous in one thing, and that was, that Audley Dale was Mrs. Thornton's murderer.

Clare had a great deal to do with this, and yet she had not accused him. But it was not what she said, but what she appeared to suppress, that had its effect upon the spectators and jury. She let them believe, without saying so, that she had been compelled to send that anonymous letter to the mayor; that she had seen so much that was wrong in Mr. Dale's relations to her mistress, that she was prepared to credit him with a still deeper crime, and that, let others think what they might, there was no deceiving her in anything—that dead woman in the adjoining room had been her mistress, and she had come foully by her end.

After a time, the officers who had been despatched to Audley Dale's apartments returned, and every eye was turned eagerly towards them, as a long piece of lace was produced, and handed to Charlotte Clare, who at once identified it as the cravat her

mistress had worn the last time she saw her. Deb did not wait to be asked if it was hers, but shrieked with horror at the sight, and a murmur ran through the room, which spoke ill for the state of feeling against Audley Dale.

His lips quivered as he looked at the flimsy thing fluttering even in that close air. He was thinking, not of his own peril, but of her who had worn it. She had been a good friend to him, that poor, gay, foolish creature, and now all these dolts and fools would condemn her for lightness or falsity, and heap whatever filth and mire they could upon her name. The eyes that were watching his face so intently, misconstrued even this natural emotion ; it was that of a murderer looking on some relic of his victim. The coroner turned to him, and giving him the usual caution, asked if he had anything to say in explanation of the circumstances that appeared so against

him. Audley Dale let himself be guided by his first impulse, which bade him answer in the negative. Why should he stand up there and tell his tale for all those fools to gape and wonder at? What could he say, indeed, but what would not only criminate himself still more, but reflect upon the woman of whose murder he was accused? He had gone to the Fort to meet her—he had carried the cravat away with him. On the whole, would not silence be the better course for the present? What *could* he say that would not make matters worse? Therefore, he answered with a little unnecessary contempt for those he was addressing, that he had nothing to tell them—he should reserve whatever explanation he had to give, for a different tribunal, if required to appear before it.

Upon which the coroner gave him to understand there would be no question but that he would be so required, and, as

every one but Audley Dale himself—to whom the turn matters had taken was from first to last inexplicable—expected he would do, summed up strongly against him, and, upon the jury returning a verdict accordingly, committed him for Wilful Murder.

CHAPTER IX.

MISS BEATEY LAYTON TAKES THE MANAGEMENT OF MATTERS.

IF Wearmouth had been in a state of excitement and perturbation that morning, it was nothing to the stir and tumult that pervaded it in the evening. A murder, however terrible, was in itself not such an unprecedented event as the fact that any one in Mr. Audley Dale's position should be committed to take his trial for the crime. Every one believed in his guilt—that was the most piquante bit of the excitement. They would not have thought him innocent for anything. In every shop, in every drawing-room, in every public-

house, nothing else was talked of; and of course, it was not very long before the news reached Beechside. Mrs. Rushington was incredulous when, after his evening visit to the reading-room, her husband came in with the news. "John, my dear, it can't be," she said solemnly, and fanned herself vigorously. "Mr. Audley Dale was, I'm afraid, no better than young men are in general—Milly, my dear, Beatey and you had better go up-stairs—John, considering all the circumstances of the case, you shouldn't have mentioned it before those girls. It's not the murder, of course, but all that preceded it. It would never do for them to know all that is talked about Mrs. Thornton. Poor woman! I don't know when I've been so shocked; but as to Mr. Dale's killing her, it's ridiculous. Young men in his position don't do that kind of thing, whatever else they may be guilty of."

Mr. Rushington sat down and took up the *Photographic Record*, his favourite solace of an evening, after his visit to the reading-room, and his perusal there of the evening papers. Mrs. Rushington sat and fanned herself, and used her smelling bottle, thinking what a good thing it was that she had rejected Audley Dale's proposals for Milly, and not even informed her that he had made them. "I shall keep Beatey and her in to-morrow, and I hope they will hear nothing of this till a little of the stir and excitement has subsided. It's not at all a story for young girls to be acquainted with."

Meanwhile the two girls up-stairs, who had heard quite enough to make them resolved to hear more, were talking matters over to themselves.

"I do n't believe it!" said Milly. "Nay, it seems an absurdity to have to say so. Audley Dale lift his hand against a woman!

—why, who that knows anything of him would think it possible ?”

Beatey agreed with her. The coroner and jury alike must be out of their senses. Milly had judged her lover hardly in the matter of Mrs. Thornton. She never disguised from herself that his *morale* was not the strongest in the world. He might have gone wrong, as, in spite of all her mother's ideas as to the judiciousness of bringing young girls up blindfold, Milly knew very well that young men did go wrong sometimes. And Mrs. Thornton, though her friend, and one of whom she had tried to think kindly, was a vain woman, and unhappily married. Audley might have erred in a moment of weakness—she had never credited him with deliberate perfidy—and Mrs. Thornton might have forgotten everything in the wish to escape from her dull and uncongenial home. And, at any rate, she owed it to herself not to become the

wife of Audley Dale till he had cleared himself from the imputations resting on him. But a crime like *this*, with the frenzied passion or the low brutal cunning which must have inspired it, was one of which she could as soon have credited herself as Audley, and with a very natural revulsion, she began to take herself to task for having repelled him as she had done, and for a moment appeared to entertain a belief in his guilt.

“I never did think it,” said Beatey. “I always knew you were too hard on the poor fellow.” She did not think it polite to say that the fact of Mrs. Rushington’s crediting the story was enough to make her disbelieve it, but it really was so.

“And he will think I believe *this*!” said Milly. “If I could only write and tell him that I know it is a lie—and that—yes—I would n’t mind telling him that I was too hard on him the other day—anything, any-

thing to comfort him in his present position."

Milly cried a little, which was a very unusual thing for her to do. Then she began to consider what had better be done.

"If one could only help him in any way, but I don't see how it is to be done. Oh, Beatey! what a nuisance it is to be a girl! If I were a man, I might go to the prison, and ask to see him, and no one would think anything wrong about it, but being a girl, I must be content to let him think I believe all that is laid to his charge."

"If you were a man, you could n't marry him," said Beatey; "for my own part, I am very well content to be a girl. It's quite as pleasant to set other people working for one as it is to do the work oneself."

"I suppose he'll write to the Bishop," said Milly.

"And very little use the Bishop will be

in the matter," replied Beatey; "and I do n't think Mr. Maurice Dale will be much, either. I do n't want to hurt your feelings, Milly, dear, but I do n't think they're a particularly clever family. There's just one person that can help us, and he must come and do it at once—Milly, I mean to telegraph to Temple Masters."

"You—but mamma——"

"Oh! I would n't shock Mrs. Rushington by letting her know anything about it for the world. She won't expect us down till tea-time; that gives us a clear hour. I shall go to the station myself; I can do it, if I run, in a quarter of an hour. I shall wait there till I get his answer back. If he's not at his chambers I sha'n't get an answer, but he'll have my message as soon as he comes home; then he'll be down to-morrow, and we shall have Audley out of prison, to a certainty, before long."

As she spoke, Beatey was wrapping her-

self up in a waterproof cloak, putting on her garden hat and a thick veil. Milly was almost too scared to help her. If only mamma knew, she would never forgive such a breach of the proprieties as was involved in a young lady going out alone after nightfall ; but Beatey reassured her by telling her that mamma never would know. "Just lie down and rest while I am gone. I wish I'd time to stay and bathe your poor head with eau-de-Cologne. Never mind, if I get an answer from Temple, that will do you more good than anything."

Milly did as she was told, and lay down. She was so thoroughly miserable, that all her usual quiet self-assertion and independence had left her. She was content to let Beatey take the lead, and direct and manage everything ; but there was just one little gleam of comfort in all this misery. It was utterly impossible that

Audley should be guilty of the greater crime imputed to him, and therefore she was convinced that he was innocent of the minor offence laid to his charge. It was a very feminine, a very illogical way of reasoning, but just now it was very convincing to Milly.

By good fortune, Temple Masters was in his chambers that evening, working hard at a brief which had come in late in the day, when a telegram was put in his hands, and he read that which startled even his well-trained nerves—"Milly and I are in great trouble. Will you come down to-morrow to help us? I am waiting at the station for your answer.—BEATRICE LAYTON."

To which he sent back word—"Yes, by the first train;" then set himself to think matters over. Not knowing his lady's trouble, he was not altogether displeased with the cause which had made her apply

to him for assistance. He argued well from the fact of her turning to him for aid, and he did not think the trouble very great. How should it be when he knew that all Beatey's people were safe and well, and that she was able to go to the station, and dispatch her message, and receive his. Blessed magical wires ! how this lawyer in love thanked the telegraph that brought him in such close communication with the lady of his thoughts ! How he pictured her waiting at the station for his answer, and reading it with the pretty eagerness that so well became her, and the lamp lighting up her face, and the clerks and officials looking on. "Though I do n't see what business Mrs. Rushington has to let her be there at this time of night," he thought, and then concluded that the "trouble" must relate to Mrs. Rushington herself or her husband, and wondered of what use the two girls, who asked for his

help, would expect him to be in the matter. Never mind ; they had asked for it. Beatey had turned to him at once in her need, showing, he considered, that he had not been very far from her thoughts while he was away, and he would have a good excuse for hurrying down on the morrow, and most likely seeing a great deal of Beatey, and pressing that suit upon her, which, as he had been so imprudent as to urge it, he could hardly withdraw from now. He had no business to have proposed to Beatey, but as he had been weak enough to do so, the sooner he knew his fate the better. He would know it before he came back home.

Then he dismissed even Beatey's bright face from his thoughts for a time, folding up the telegram very carefully, however—after all, was it not, in a manner, the first love letter he had ever had from Beatey ? he should always consider it that—and set

to work resolutely at that brief for the next three hours, after which he packed up his carpet bag, and then lay down and slept soundly, undisturbed even by dreams of Beatey, till the grey wintry dawn broke in and told him it was time to hasten to her aid.

CHAPTER X.

BEATEY LAYTON'S PROMISE.

THE nearest road from the station at Wearmouth to Beechside skirted the inferior portion of the town, in a direction exactly opposite to that of the Rectory of St. Hilda. You turned sharply off as soon as you were in the open air, and walked for some distance between two high walls, one of which bounded the playground of a school, the other the enclosure belonging to the workhouse, and when past these you come on a number of small streets, holding small shops and workmen's houses, altogether an uninviting neighbourhood, which

no one went through to gain the beach, unless in a hurry to do so.

Temple Masters, being in haste on the morning of his visit to Wearmouth, took the road, and had not gone very far before a frank, young voice struck on his ear—"I thought I should meet you if I came this way; I am so glad, for Milly's sake, to see you."

It was Beatey Layton, and she held out her hand to him with great cordiality. She had on the waterproof that she had worn the previous night, though the morning was bright, clear, and frosty; but it covered her, dress and all, completely, and Beatey, this morning, was just as anxious to escape notice, as on other days she was ready to meet it. She turned back with him, and walked on by his side, and began pouring out the story and the mystery of the last few days.

It was all new to Temple Masters. Something of Mrs. Thornton's disappear-

ance he had heard even up in London, but it had not seemed to him at all to be marvelled at, that she should have left her home and her husband, simply because she was thoroughly weary of both. He had not himself connected Audley Dale with her flight, but it would not have surprised him if other people had done so ; but to lay her murder at his door—his ; and he one of the kindest, if one of the weakest of men—was an absurdity so great, that if it had not been for its attendant horrors, and the fact that, one way or another, it seemed clear Henrietta Thornton had come foully to her end, he must have laughed at it. As it was, laughing was out of the question ; so also was love-making for the present, although he had come down with the full intention of proceeding in his suit.

They were near Beechside before Beatey had finished her narrative. “I must go in,” she said, as soon as she had concluded,

“and Milly and I shall want to know how you are getting on, and what you think of matters, before the day is out, and it won’t do for you to come to the house and tell us, because we’re not supposed to know anything at all of this matter. Mrs. Rushington is lying down in her morning-room with a bad headache, and Milly is kept in close attendance on her, that she should n’t go out and hear all these horrors, and I’m supposed to be up in my own room altering one of my dresses. It’s not at all the sort of story Mrs. Rushington would consider young ladies should be acquainted with, but still young ladies must help their friends. I’m bound to help Milly, and that poor simple Audley is a great deal more than a friend to her.”

“Mrs. Rushington seems an invaluable *chaperon*,” said Temple Masters. “Do you often make such escapades as these?”

“She does very well for us,” said Beatey;

“she would n’t for a great many girls, but Milly and I are quite able to take care of ourselves, and good natured enough to let her think that she takes care of us. But never mind Mrs. Rushington. When can you let me know what progress you have made in matters?”

“When can I see you? Can you take a stroll on the beach this afternoon?”

“Not to be thought of. Mrs. Rushington will make *me* read to her then. She has a great idea of cultivating my mind as well as Milly’s. I can come down and talk to you over the wall after dinner, about seven. Milly will play her mamma to sleep while I do. There will be no one about. I shall sit on the bank inside, and hear all you have to tell me. I hope it will be good news.”

“That is hardly likely, so soon, but whatever it is, I will be at the wall by seven o’clock, to tell you.”

Beatey had a long dull day after that. Mrs. Rushington kept her and Milly with her the rest of the morning, and when visitors were announced, received them in the drawing-room, so that if they had anything to say of the Great Scandal that was stirring all Wearmouth that day, the girls should hear nothing of it. She had selected an especially heavy book for their reading, and kept them to it. It seemed as if dinner would never come, and when it did come, as if it would never be over. But it was finished at last, and Mrs. Rushington, reposing majestically on the couch, desired Milly, as usual, to sit down to the piano, and soon afterwards was asleep, under the influence of one of Beethoven's sonatas. That was Beatey's opportunity ; it was long past seven, but she had no doubt but that Temple Masters would be waiting for her, and, throwing a cloak around her, she hurried to the bank by the wall, and kneel-

ing on it, peered out in the darkness for him.

The night was chilly, and the bank, to say the least, was damp ; but Beatey was not to be daunted by such trifles, no, nor by what Temple Masters might think of her meeting him thus. She had her friend to serve, and friendship was a very thorough thing with Beatey, and as to Temple Masters, she considered, "If he has a grain of sense, he'll know that I should never trust him like this, unless I liked him a great deal better than I have ever let him know before."

There was no one likely to be about, at that hour, near Beechside. It was too cold and bleak in the middle of November for any one to be strolling on the sands by moonlight, and the villa lay out of the way of the ordinary traffic of the town, so that Beatey and Temple Masters did not run much danger of being disturbed in

their *tête-à-tête*. Beatey coiled herself up on the bank, and felt secure, and in another moment felt, rather than saw—for the night was misty and dark—that Temple Masters was close to her on the opposite side of the wall.

“I have more to tell you than I thought I should have,” he said, gravely. “I have seen the woman whom they discovered in the Fort, and who was buried this afternoon, and I am certain that she is not Mrs. Thornton!”

“Her servants swore that she was their former mistress,” said Beatey, eagerly. “Would n’t they know better than you?”

“One of the servants was too frightened even to look at the dead body she was called on to identify; the other would swear anything that would injure Audley Dale!”

“Then she wrote it!” cried Beatey.

“Wrote what?”

“An anonymous letter Milly had a day or two before the ball, and about which, I don't think Audley gave her any very clear explanation. I suppose he could n't—but please go on. What makes you think it was not Mrs. Thornton whom they buried to-day?”

“The boots. Mrs. Thornton would have walked barefooted before she would have put on such clumsy gear; and the size of the hands—Mrs. Thornton's were miracles of smallness. I have seen the coroner, and pointed out these facts. The first, which he says a juryman remarked at the time, Charlotte Clare accounted for, by asserting that her mistress wore such articles when walking out in bad weather, or along the coast. I know Charlotte Clare a little better than he does, and I don't believe her. As to the hands, he says the effect of immersion in water, on a human body, is to enlarge it; but no im-

mersion would ever have made Mrs. Thornton's hands the size of this dead woman's."

"But the dress is hers, is it not? Milly and I were told that there were several who identified it?"

"I should n't think any dress would be easily recognizable after being a month in salt water; but, however, that is not the question at present. I can't get any one to believe that this is not Mrs. Thornton; the difficulty, now, will be to find where Mrs. Thornton is. Audley can tell me nothing of her, but that he was to have met her on that day, and did not do so."

"He was to have met her! Oh, poor Milly! He deserves all that has happened to him for his treachery to her."

"Do n't be quite so fast. He has not been treacherous at all. I fancy Miss Lisdale is quite aware that she is a good deal cleverer than her intended husband; and that whenever she marries she will

have to look after him, as she looks after her mamma now. I dare say she will have sufficient tact to hide her successful management in the one case as thoroughly as she does now in the other; and Audley, like a great many much cleverer men, has done one or two foolish things in his time. Foolish, not wicked, Miss Beatrice Layton, though folly, in this world, has a great deal more to answer for than sin. The greatest folly of all was, I think, not making her fully acquainted with his past. I suppose you know something of a young woman called Charlotte Clare, who gave her evidence, I am told, on the inquest with wonderful clearness and modesty. I do n't doubt it in the least, the hussy! and she seems to have done her very best to bring matters home to the poor fellow."

"Yes—yes. What about her?"

"A good deal. Audley has charged me to let Miss Lisdale know everything at

last." And then Temple went into the whole story. "He wanted her to know this—may I leave it to you to tell her? She has not so much to forgive, after all, as she imagined."

"She has quite enough to forgive," said Beatey, indignantly. "To be second to a waiting-maid! And why didn't he tell her the truth from the first?"

"Perhaps because he was afraid that she would take the same view of it that you have done. Now, to-morrow I mean to see Charlotte Clare, and, if possible, judge for myself whether Mr. Thornton is quite incapable of throwing any light on the matter."

"You do n't mean to say," gasped Beatey, "that—that—you think *he* had anything to do with Mrs. Thornton's murder?"

"I do n't believe Mrs. Thornton is murdered at all. Some poor creature, certainly, has come to her end in that Fort,

but not Mrs. Thornton. It is all a wretched imbroglio, arising out of that poor fellow's weakness. What on earth could possess him to commit himself first with one woman and then with another, for neither of whom he cared a straw?"

"But you'll help him out of it?" said Beatey, quickly. "I admit the justice of all you say; but we can't all of us be so strong or so clever as some people. You'll help him out of it, Mr. Temple Masters—or—"

"Or—well?"—— and Temple Masters had hold of the two little hands that had nestled for warmth under the cloak.

"Or—I'll never come to a railway station to meet you again, or give you a *tête-à-tête* on a cold night over a garden wall. Seriously, you'll help your friend, because he is *your* friend, and because the girl, who is *mine*, cares more for him perhaps than he deserves. Never mind, it's a

good thing, possibly, that in this world liking does not always go by merit."

"Is that the reason you like me, Beatey Layton?—in spite of my deservings, or because of them?" Temple could keep from speaking openly no longer. He held her hands still tightly clasped in his. She had made no effort to withdraw them. All the horrors and the mysteries which she had summoned him to assist in clearing up—Audley Dale's peril, and Milly's distress,—were forgotten for the moment—forgotten, too, that in spite of the warm cloak she had thrown around her, Beatey might catch cold that chill November night, or that Mrs. Rushington might wake from her after-dinner siesta, and cause search to be made for her daughter's friend. When Beatey had first told him to come to her at the garden wall, and she would speak to him, he had, in spite of all the serious things about which he was to speak, thought of

a policeman's courtship of a servant-maid, and wished that Mrs. Rushington's sense of propriety was not so exquisite, so that Beatey and he might have had their conversation in a more decorous manner. Never mind; he had her now, he had done her behest manfully that day, and he would learn whether or not he was to look for any guerdon at her hands.

Of course he would do his best for the poor fellow now waiting so drearily in the borough gaol of Wearmouth, whether he was to have any recompense or not, but still, if he could have just the one especial recompense that he most wished for, it would be very pleasant to him.

"I never said I liked you, Mr. Temple Masters," said Beatey, defiantly. But she did not draw her hands away. He held them together.

"If you had not liked me—if I had been totally indifferent to you, would you have

sent for me directly a real trouble came, —would you have turned to me at once as the best and fittest person you could apply to in a great need that, if it was not your own, was that of a friend in whom you are greatly interested ?”

Beatey hesitated a moment, then she said, frankly, “ No, I should not.”

“ Could n’t you have told me as much the last time I put such a question to you ? Was there any need to have kept me all this time in suspense ? I don’t think you’ve used me well, Miss Beatey Layton.”

He had hold of both her hands, now, in one of his ; he was trying to put his disengaged arm round her waist ; but she drew back a little, and said—

“ I do n’t think you’ve used me quite well either, Mr. Temple Masters.”

“ What have you to complain of ? Did n’t I offer you all that I had to offer ? Precious little, I own, but it was my best.

Haven't I hurried here at your bidding, without even knowing that it was a friend of my own in whom you were interested? Don't you know that I'd stop here at any cost—at any sacrifice to myself, even if the person in whose behalf you wished me to exert myself was an utter stranger to me? I don't really see that you've suffered so much at my hands."

"Suffered," said Beatey, with a little curl of her pretty, wilful mouth — and what a pity it was the night was so dark that he could not see it—and a slight shrug of her shoulders. "Well, I have n't suffered, because I thought it would all come right in the end : but I should like to know how long it is since you first cared for me, and in everything *but* words have, in one way or another, contrived to let me know it."

"Long enough for me to have a very lively idea of the torments of Tantalus,"

said Temple Masters, gaily. "And so you found out my secret, did you? And I do think, Beatey, it's more than three years since I first knew it myself."

"And all that time—all those years, what has kept you silent? I know, and I'll tell you, Mr. Masters!" What a pity the night was so dark that he could see nothing of the crimsoning cheek, the flashing eyes which made Beatey's pretty face quite beautiful. "You were afraid, as so many men are, to come to a poor girl honestly, and tell her you were poor—that you had nothing but your right hand and your brain to trust to; and you were afraid you could not ask her to trust in them as well. Was poverty such a dreadful thing to you that you thought I should be scared at it? or had you so little confidence in your own constancy that you would n't put mine to the proof by asking me to wait till you were a richer man. It was a mere chance,

you know it was, that at last you spoke when you did ! It was nothing but a fit of pique or jealousy to which I was indebted for the avowal with which you favoured me the other night ! If it had not been for that, how long would you have gone on doubting and mistrusting me ? thinking—yes, thinking that I was as great a coward as yourself, or so much afraid of a few hardships, or of the deprivation of a few luxuries, that I would sell myself to any bidder who could only insure them to me.”

“ I never thought *that* of you, Beatey,” said Temple Masters. He was having something very like a scolding, but he loved the girl better than ever who was giving it to him.

“ You thought something very like it when you spoke to me the other night. And did you think that I would take you then ? That after having been misjudged for years, I would come at your bidding the

moment you called me. I knew you loved me years ago, and if you had valued me rightly, you would have found words years ago to have told me of it !”

“I wish I had, Beatey, I should have been a much happier man. But you poor, good, brave little soul, you don’t know what it is that I’ve asked you to share.”

“A garret ?” said Beatey. “Never mind, we shall come down to the first-floor, before long, and have the whole house, by-and-bye.”

“Not quite so bad as that, but I’m a poor man, Beatey.”

“You won’t be so always. If it were Audley Dale, now, it would be another matter. But mind, I hope you understand me clearly. We will go on as we have been for just a little longer. I should be ashamed if I were to think too much of my own future, while Milly, who has been such a good friend to me ever since I’ve known

her, is in trouble. If you get Audley out of this dreadful affair, and everything comes right with Milly and him—why then——”

“ Well, and then ?” said Temple Masters, and now his arm was round Beatey’s waist, and he was drawing her very close indeed to him.

“ Well, and then if you like to ask me to mount to a garret I’ll do so.”

CHAPTER XI.

CLARE IS EQUAL TO THE OCCASION.

MISS BEATRICE LAYTON was happier after this conversation over the garden wall than she had been for months. So happy, that she shrank from confiding what had passed even to Milly. "It will seem so hard upon her now she is in such trouble herself," thought Beatey.

She had no fears for the future. She meant what she said when she talked of mounting to a garret if need be. She would have done it, and scrubbed the floor too, if there had been occasion. She was full of confidence in Temple Masters—full

of reliance on herself. She knew that she could meet poverty with a spirit that would disarm it of half its terrors, and as to the little shifts and pinches that a narrow income involved, they would only be things to be laughed at even while enduring them, for it was not to be thought that Temple Masters' wife would have to endure them very long.

But if, just now, she kept silence about her own especial happiness, she had plenty to tell Milly of Temple's belief that it was not Mrs. Thornton who had been discovered in the Fort. Then there was the whole long story relating to Clare, which Milly heard with more sorrow than anger. "He might have told me—he should have told me from the first," was all she said, and Beatey heard her with a little surprise.

"She takes it a great deal better than I should have done," was her thought, "but I suppose she's made up her mind all along

that Audley is but a poor thing after all, and so makes the best of him. How strange it does seem that any one should care for such a piece of feebleness ! But what a good thing it is, after all, that we are not all alike in our tastes ! What would become of all the Audley Dales in the world if women didn't sometimes love them out of sheer compassion ?”

If Milly was angry with any one after the first moment of vexation it was with herself. She had judged and condemned her lover unheard. Beatey was not going to tell her that even at the last he had had a good opportunity of speaking in his own defence. Milly would not blame him now for anything ; he was in such danger that she could do nothing but pity him. Beatey tried to possess her with her own belief in Temple Masters. “ He will get him over it, don't be afraid, dear ! Temple has taken it in hand, and he will carry it through.”

The girls slept together this night as they had done the last, and every now and then Milly woke from her sleep with a troubled cry, as in her dreams the consciousness of her lover's danger presented itself to her. Then Beatey had to reiterate the above assurance, in which she believed so fully herself that at last Milly believed it too, and became, to some extent, reassured on his account.

Temple Masters presented himself that night at the Rectory, and asked for Charlotte Clare. Deb ran up-stairs to tell her, and offered to take her place while she went down to see him. Clare went, trim, neat and staid as ever, and presented herself before Mr. Masters in the dining-room, into which Deb had shown him. She knew in a moment what he had come for, and armed herself accordingly, and making a slight bow—servants curtsied, Clare never did—stood waiting

his pleasure in apparently respectful silence.

He did not keep her waiting long. "I think you remember me," he said, not at all as if he were addressing an inferior. Indeed, he could hardly bring himself to look at Clare in that light. He could not help respecting her abilities. She was, he considered, a Jezebel, but a very clever one.

Clare looked up and answered. "Yes, Mr. Masters, I have met you before."

"And, therefore, you can guess why I have come?"

Clare shook her head—this time it suited her to be in ignorance of the motives that induced this visit.

"I think you must be able to make a pretty shrewd guess too. I have come to ask you, not what motive induced you to swear that the dead woman found in the Fort is your late mistress, Mrs. Thornton, for I think I can form a pretty safe guess at

that, but how long do you think the deception you are carrying on is likely to last? Mrs. Thornton is *not* dead. You know that as well as I do. When she makes her reappearance, as she will be sure to do as soon as she becomes aware of the position in which her absence places Mr. Dale, don't you think you will find yourself in rather an awkward plight? Would n't it be better to anticipate the very unpleasant consequences of an indictment for perjury, by even now stating that, on reflection, you do not feel so convinced that the dead body they have buried to-day is Mrs. Thornton? Surely you've wit enough to say something about the dress which did not occur to you before? I don't ask you to be quite positive in the matter—that would be awkward now—but you might throw some doubt upon it.”

“ You'll excuse me, sir,” said Clare, looking him steadily in the face, “but I feel

no doubt whatever. It is possible that I may be mistaken, but my impression is that I am not. And as to an indictment for perjury, that would hardly affect me, if you remember that I only swore according to the best of my belief. I don't at all expect we shall ever see or hear more of the late Mrs. Thornton. Dead people can't come to life again. But if she does, I think you'll find it very hard to have me punished for what, after all, would be an error any one might fall into under the circumstances."

She was not to be frightened—that was clear. He did not believe her; nay, he felt sure that she did not expect him to do so; but the lie answered her purpose sufficiently when she showed him that she was prepared to stand by it, and had no fear of the consequences. He reiterated his assertion that it was not Mrs. Thornton who had been found in the Fort; to which she replied, that he could hardly be as good a

judge on that point as herself. "Did I not handle her very hair? You always thought it as black as ink. I knew where to look for the grey streaks in it, and I found them, just above the left ear, where they were always put so carefully out of sight." She could not help this; she could not lose the pleasure of letting him know her former mistress was indebted a good deal to successful dressing. She would have indulged in this little bit of spite at the coroner's inquest, only there it might have had an appearance which she wished to avoid. She did not care much for appearances here; she merely wished Mr. Temple Masters to know that she was not afraid of him, but at the same time, why should n't he learn that Mrs. Thornton was neither so young nor so handsome as he had thought her?

Mr. Masters asked after Mr. Thornton; but Clare had her answer ready for him here. He was much too ill to see any one.

He knew nothing of what had passed, and, till the medical man gave her permission, she could not allow any one to see him. It might be—it was very likely—that he would never recover. Mr. Harben was not at all sanguine, but, at any rate, everything depended on his being kept quiet.

He was baffled every way. He could make nothing of her—yes, one thing. He was more certain than ever that the dead woman was not Mrs. Thornton. Equally certain that Clare was aware of the fact. He too had noticed her hair. It had struck him as being of a coarser texture than Mrs. Thornton's, but he might easily be deceived there; but of one thing he was certain, that not a grey hair mingled with its blackness. The very official who had shown him the body had commented on the fact, while remarking on the luxuriance of the tresses, which were all of beauty the poor disfigured remains of mortality possessed. If Mrs.

Thornton had streaks of grey mingling with her raven locks—and the quiet malice of Clare's tones satisfied him that she was speaking the truth there—why then it was not Mrs. Thornton whose decaying form he had looked upon that day.

He went away, back to his hotel ; but he had not done his work yet. He drew up and sent to the *Times*, and two other leading London papers, advertisements entreating H. T., late of St. Hilda, Wearmouth, to communicate with him. He had some thoughts of offering a reward to any one who would give him intelligence of her, but at last decided that he would not do so. "It would only put her on her mettle," he considered. She might be fool enough to content herself with writing, and that would do no good. "I suppose this case will get into the London papers, and she will then understand why it is so imperative that I should hear at once from her."

He then sat down and wrote to the Palace at Drowsehead. Audley had entreated him to do so. "I can't," he said, frankly; "I have n't courage to put pen to paper to tell my father what has befallen me. Break it to him, and make as light of it as you can."

But it was not at all an easy thing to break. Even with all his anxiety; with all the horrors in the background; with all his pity for Audley, Temple Masters could hardly repress a smile as he put pen to paper and commenced his letter to "My Lord." What would "My Lord" think of his news before he came to the end of his letter? Would it not seem almost too incredible? Would he not think that some audacious hoax was being played upon him? or, when at last convinced that what he was being told was truly a reality, and a very serious one, would he not be far more inclined to condemn Audley than to help

him? Help him he must, but he would never forgive him. Audley's innocence would have no effect upon him there. He would be the black sheep of his family henceforth. If only it had been Maurice, it would have seemed, if not a natural sequence to his erratic ways and thoughts, still, something less incredible than it was, being his brother's case. Temple Masters felt, as he closed his letter, as if he were firing off a bomb into the Bishop's palace. Then he went to bed, tired with his day's work, but still satisfied that he had done one good thing for himself in it, in securing Beatey Layton as his future wife.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. THORNTON SPEAKS AT LAST.

CLARE was not quite so confident that her master would not recover as she had wished to make Temple Masters believe. All that day he had been better, sensible and conscious too, she was sure. She had said nothing of this when Mr. Harben paid his visit, and the patient being in a deep sleep, from which it was not advisable to awake him, he had not detected it. But he was better—she was sure of that. His eyes followed her intelligently—once or twice he had spoken—seemed to wish, even, for conversation, but she had

checked him. He had had, in the course of his illness, one or two such intervals before, when he had been able to think, at least, coherently, if not to speak. But he could speak now, and his mind was stronger and clearer in its tone. Clare saw it plainly. She did not wish him to die; she had no especial liking for him—Clare had never had a liking for any one—but she had no animus against him, and if it had not been that his premature recovery would interfere seriously with her plans, she would have been proud of it as a proof of her good nursing. He might have a relapse—even the morrow might see him worse; but Clare was rather afraid that it would not, and, just now, for him to get well enough even to talk sensibly for an hour, would, if he were told what had occurred in the last day or two, be of serious detriment to Clare's plans. "He could tell a great deal if he chose"—she felt sure of that—and yet it never

occurred to her to prevent his telling, by so much as giving him the wrong draught or withholding the right one. That would have seemed akin to murder, and of anything so like an infraction of the law Clare had an instinctive dread. If murder could be done in any other way ; if this slow, creeping, stealthy vengeance of hers was to result in the death of Audley Dale ; she would not have been very sorry. To bring *that* about she had done nothing of which the law could take the slightest cognizance. She had hesitated a moment before she swore that the dead body she had seen was that of her mistress ; then given her testimony to the effect that, to the best of her belief, it was. That saved her, in Clare's opinion. Who but herself could tell what she believed or did not believe ? But still she never seriously contemplated Audley Dale's suffering the last penalty which justice exacts from offenders. " There's one law

for the rich and one for the poor," Clare said to herself, "and they'll never hang a bishop's son, and an earl's nephew." But Audley Dale would be humbled to the very dust, ashamed to show his face in his own land—Miss Lisdale would give him up, his family abandon him—he would become such an object that even if he sued to Charlotte Clare, she would think him too vile for her acceptance. That was the prospect before her, that was the delicious morsel on which she was gloating day and night, and that was what Mr. Thornton might deprive her of, if he rallied in time to give his account of what had happened to his wife the last day she left St. Hilda Rectory.

Clare was seriously disquieted on this account when she left him. She had kept Mr. Harben from seeing how matters really were, to-day, but she might not be able to do so to-morrow, and if it had not been that she had such a belief in Deb's stu-

pidity, that she thought no harm could come from her remaining with the patient, great as was her wish to see Mr. Temple Masters, and to learn what he wanted of her, she would not have vacated her place in the sick room to do so at this critical juncture.

Deb was stupid, and her stupidity militated against Clare's schemes more than any amount of cleverness could have done. The patient opened his eyes and looked at her—he evidently knew her, and Deb's heart was rejoiced—he spoke, called her by her name, and then, in spite of Clare's injunctions as to the necessity of strict quiet, and the danger of speaking a word, Deb could keep silence no longer.

“Glad tew see you so much better, sir,” she said heartily.

Mr. Thornton smiled feebly. He was glad Deb was near him. Deb would tell him what he wanted to know—Clare was civil and

kind, but once or twice he had tried to talk that day, and she had checked him, telling him he must not speak; and there was something he so much wished to speak about. Clare had left the bedroom door open that morning for the purpose of ventilation, when she thought him asleep, but when in reality he was only lying still with his eyes closed; and one of the tradesmen's boys had called, and had a little gossip in the hall with Deb. It was only a few words, and they were spoken in a low tone—Clare kept the whole house in a state of wonderful stillness—but yet Mr. Thornton, whose hearing illness had quickened, caught some words having reference to the inquest, and Deb's appearance thereat, which made him wish to hear more. What did it mean? Was it, indeed, his wife who had been brought to the "King's Arms," and whom Deb had been called upon to identify? Had the sea given her up, and

the old ruins divulged their secret? Were they asking how she had come to her end, and speculating and wondering upon what could have taken her there to meet it? All this buzz and talk about his dead wife, what would it have been had they only known the truth? What was it that they should say she was dead, when they might have had so much more to speak of? He had saved her that—yes, he had saved her, protected her even from her own weakness. Let her sleep in peace; there were none to cast stones upon her grave now. “Deb,” he said, “what was that you and some lad were talking about this morning—was that your mistress whom they found in the old Fort?”

“Lor a mercy, sir! and how came yew to hear o’ that, an’ I thort we did n’t speak above a whisper?”

“Just tell me, Deb, was it your mistress?”

Deb began to cry—it was the proper thing to do under the circumstances—then she said, “Yes, it were her, an’ they hev brort her to the ‘King’s Arms,’ an’ Clare an’ I hev had to say whether ’twere her or not. ’Twas not every one could tell—poor thing! the sea had changed her so. But now, do n’t take on, sir, please do n’t, or yew ’ll never git out o’ this; an’ ’tis what we must all come tew, some by sea, and some by land; but yew musn’t take on, an’ do n’t let Clare know I hev told yew aught, or I ’ll never hear the last of it.”

Her master seemed to take no notice; he closed his eyes and remained quite still, and Deb was wondering whether or not he would “take on,” and hoping earnestly he would tell Clare nothing. “There ’ll be a fine row if he does; she ’ll look me up, an’ look me down, an’ turn up her nose as if I were the biggest fool in the world; and how could I help it? If he wanted to know

what was sayin' about his wife, how was I to put him off, an' say him no? Would she hev me tell him a parcel of lies, I wonder? He'd ha' found me out—he always did—whenever I tried one on him just for peace and quiet, afore he brort the missus home; he'd always a way o' lookin' as if he was readin' one off like a book. Any how, I know I worn't goin' tew tell lies tew him, an' he so bad, just to please Clare; an', if she rows, so I'll tell her."

Deb didn't mind telling lies to Clare though, for when she came up and asked if Mr. Thornton had been quiet, she was informed that he had not spoken a word, but just laid like that thar all the time Clare had been away; and as Mr. Thornton was now lying with closed eyes, to all appearance asleep, Clare saw no reason to doubt Deb's word.

He said nothing to her. After a time, he opened his eyes, and Clare's misgivings

were redoubled. By the look that rested on her, she became more than ever convinced that it could not be very long before he would be able, not only to talk, but to hear, and if once he did hear that Audley Dale was in prison for the murder of Mrs. Thornton, Clare felt convinced he would, and could say words that would set him free. It was a case of time, but time was gaining fearfully upon her ; it only wanted a fortnight to the assizes, and before that fortnight was half over, if Mr. Thornton progressed as he was doing now, Audley Dale might be a free man. Even to-morrow Mr. Thornton might be able to speak to Mr. Harben. The doctor had asked her very seriously that morning if the patient showed any signs of returning consciousness, and she had told him, none whatever. If Mr. Thornton were awake to-morrow, the doctor would judge for himself, and even then proceed at once to speak on the very

subject that, above all, she wished avoided. She went on with her crochet, quietly and quickly as ever, her deft fingers showing nothing of the storm raging within, but all the time the thought eating into her heart like a viper was—"If he should recover after all, or be able to speak sensibly enough to set that villain free!" Then she got up, and smoothed her patient's pillow, and bent over him, and gave him a little arrowroot, and told him he was looking and feeling better; and yet, all that time, what a relief it would have been if he had closed his eyes in their last sleep, or if she had seen the lips dumb for ever, that alone could tell the secret she shared with him.

Mr. Thornton slept long and soundly that night, and woke in the morning better and stronger. But he said nothing as yet to Clare; indeed, he had so much to think of; and in his weak state, thought itself was sufficient. She was dead then—the

wife who had wronged him. He accepted the fact without remorse or compunction. All along, her death had seemed the only possible solution of the dreadful problem caused by her dishonour, but now other complications were arising which he had not foreseen. Deb had spoken to him as to one who was concerned for his wife's loss. Would not people look for some show of grief from him, some decent natural sorrow, and how could he manifest such? Would there not be wonders and questionings, if he were calm and unmoved? and if he *did* give way, if he *did* show all that her death had cost him, would not that be lifting up the veil which hid her life, and telling them the very thing which above all, even for that poor dead sinner's sake, he would most avoid?

He had no fear for himself. Let them do their worst, what was life to him? Only, if they ever knew how she had come

by her end, would not they guess the reason that had led him to take judgment into his own hands ; and yet, how should he go on like this ? a living lie ! A man supposed to be mourning, with a tender natural grief, for the wife hurried from him, and yet all the time rejoicing that now at least there was an end of shame, that the poor frail thing had put off her sin with her life, and gone where temptation would never more assail her.

Would they let him be in peace ? would they quietly bury her, and say no more of her ? or would they torment him, and pester him with questions and regrets, till, at last, the miserable truth must be avowed, and his wife's weakness be blazoned before every eye that liked to read it ?

Not that at any rate. If he had to own that he had done this thing, they might guess, but they should never know all the

truth. As far as might be, he would screen his wife's memory to the last.

There was a trial coming on for him that very day. It had occurred to Temple Masters that possibly Mr. Thornton's medical man might allow him that access to his patient, which Clare had refused ; and, accordingly, as soon as he had breakfasted, he had hurried to the smart new villa occupied by that gentleman. It held a prominent place amongst the new houses, recently erected for the accommodation of visitors. Mr. Harben was a rising man, fast pushing his way. He was still a bachelor, and the breakfast table, which he had not yet left—having been up late the preceding night—was not presided over by a lady ; at which, Temple Masters felicitated himself when ushered into the room where the doctor sat. He owed this distinction to his having sent in his card, instead of being content to wait with the different

patients, who were already filling the doctor's ante-room. Mr. Harben knew his name—remembered him too, having met him at Beechside—and accosted him at once as an acquaintance.

Temple Masters declined the proffered breakfast, and dashed at once into the subject which had brought him there,—greatly to the doctor's satisfaction,—with a room full of patients to dispose of before he started on his morning round, he had no time to waste on mere ceremony. “I want to ask you how Mr. Thornton really is,” said Temple, “and whether or not he is aware of his wife's disappearance.”

“In answer to the first question, I begin to have some faint hopes of him. As to the next, I should say that he knows nothing of his wife's death. He has been in no state to have the intelligence communicated to him.”

“I said disappearance, not death, Mr.

Harben. The woman they buried yesterday afternoon, under the name of Mrs. Thornton, was not that lady."

"I was not called upon to identify her, and, therefore, cannot speak from my own knowledge, but the description applied wonderfully to the missing lady. She was known to have entered the Fort, was never seen to leave it, and who else could it be that they found there?"

"That remains to be seen. It's enough for my purpose that they did not find Mrs. Thornton. I wish to see her husband to ascertain from him whether she really did go to the Fort that day, and if he can tell me anything of her movements afterwards. How soon do you think that will be possible?"

"I can tell you better after I have seen my patient. He could not have answered one of your questions coherently forty-eight hours ago, and, remember, that when

he is able, in one sense, to answer them, it will be doubtful whether I shall choose to incur the responsibility of allowing him to do so. There is no knowing what the consequences might be, if told not merely of his wife's death, but of her murder."

"She was not murdered, and she is not dead. I imagine that, like a great many other people, Mr. and Mrs. Thornton did not live too happily together. They possibly had a quarrel, and the lady has gone home to her relations. I don't for a moment believe anything worse of her, whatever the scandal-mongers in this town, or elsewhere, may do ; but you're clever folks about here, fixing a crime on Mr. Audley Dale, which it would have been simply impossible for him to commit. I want to see what light Mr. Thornton can throw on his wife's movements. You must let me see him as soon as possible. There is no time to be lost. The assizes are on in a fortnight,

and I want this matter cleared up in time to save Audley Dale the degradation of standing in the dock, even to receive an acquittal."

"I've my patient's life to consider."

"I've a great deal more than life to consider, in the case of my friend. I promise you I'll use every precaution, if you'll let me see him. Nay, I do n't know why we need let him know, at first, that there is any thought of Mrs. Thornton's death. I shall only speak of her as being missing. I dare say he can give us some clue to her whereabouts, and it seems pretty clear that nothing but her appearance in the flesh will clear Mr. Dale of the absurd accusation they have brought against him."

"She will never reappear," said Mr. Harben, "I think the evidence as to her identity was too conclusive for that."

How could it be otherwise, when that

respectable young person, Clare, had sworn that to the best of her belief, it was her mistress, whom she had been taken to see? Sworn it too, with such an air of conviction, he had heard. Now, was it likely that she could be mistaken—she, who must have known every peculiarity of the dead lady's person, every article in her wardrobe. Still, it was only natural that Mr. Temple Masters should think otherwise, or, at least, appear to do so. He had his friend to consider.

“We won't discuss that any further,” said Temple. “Whether Mrs. Thornton is living or dead, her disappearance just now is equally prejudicial to my friend. Mr. Thornton, I am convinced, can throw some light upon that disappearance. The question is, when can you let me see him?”

“I will tell you that if you will call again this evening, but I doubt whether he will rally enough, between this and the

assizes, to give you anything like the information you want. Remember, I can't have my patient killed. After pulling a man almost from death's door, I can't have you throwing him back inside it, for the sake of trying to see if he can give you a little information, whose utility seems to me very doubtful."

A servant brought in a message for the doctor. Some one was waiting who could wait no longer. Temple Masters understood the hint conveyed, and went away at once, leaving Mr. Harben to proceed with his morning's work.

At one o'clock the doctor was in Mr. Thornton's chamber. The patient was apparently again asleep—"had had a good night," Clare told him, "and on the whole seemed better." It was no use attempting to hide that from the doctor, she thought. The pulse and the invalid's general appearance would speak for themselves. Mr. Harben drew

her towards the door. "Has he shown any signs of returning consciousness? Does he seem at all to miss his wife?"

Clare shook her head as a negative, and Mr. Harben went back to take another look at his patient. "I should like to see him awake," he thought. "I should like to judge for myself whether or not the brain is still affected." As he stood by the bedside, looking thoughtfully down at the sick man, the other opened his eyes, and the look of intelligence and recognition was enough to satisfy Mr. Harben on that point. "Better, decidedly. Now, I wonder, if in the interests of justice, or rather in behalf of Mr. Audley Dale, I dare put what the lawyers call a leading question. I think I'll venture presently."

He addressed several questions to his patient, which met with coherent answers. Then he went a little further, and congratulated him on his improvement. "You're

getting on well. But you have had such a capital nurse. I dare not take half the credit of your recovery to myself. Even Mrs. Thornton, if she had been here to do it, could not have attended to you more carefully than her deputy here has done."

Mr. Thornton looked fixedly at him. What did he mean by speaking thus of his wife? Was it to try and prepare him—as was the fashion, he supposed, when bad news had to be communicated to invalids—to hear of her death? Was he supposed to know nothing of that as yet? When told, what would they look to him to do? How did other men bear such tidings? Oh! those happy other men, to whom a wife's death was the heaviest grief that they could think of as connected with her! Those happy other men to whom death seemed so great a grief, because they had never known one infinitely greater! He would not try and imitate such as these

when told of his supposed bereavement. How would it be possible? That which to them had been the downfall of every hope, was to him the one deliverance. How could he seem crushed and overcome by that which had been his only remedy for a great and untold ill?

No, he would not lie there and let this man think that he knew nothing of his wife's death, and go away, planning what he should say the next time he came, and how little by little the "worst"—oh, God! if that could *but* have been the worst—should be broken to him! He would not, while yet under the very shadow of death, be acting and planning subterfuges and falsehoods. He would speak the truth, let what might come of it to himself. Not *all* the truth, for fear of what might come to her. Let her be honoured in her grave, if possible.

Clare drew her breath, and waited for

his answer. Some instinct told her what was coming. He could never have fathomed her nature. Was it the serpent craft, or the womanly intuition within her that made her sometimes understand him as his wife had never done?—which made her feel not one whit surprised, though staggered and perplexed for the instant, at hearing him say to Mr. Harben, in the low, tremulous tones of great illness, words which yet were clearer to Clare's ears than words had ever been before. "How should my wife be here to nurse me when you know that she no longer lives to do it?"

CHAPTER XIII.

CLARE GROWS NERVOUS.

TWO days after, Temple Masters sat by the bedside of Harold Thornton. Mr. Harben had given his opinion that he might do so. As the patient was aware of his wife's death, it could not injure him very greatly to say how she had come by it, if only proper care were used; and Temple promised to take every care. Mr. Harben had said nothing further to his patient of his wife. Clare had satisfied him as to the way he had come by his knowledge. "Deb must have told him when I left her with him for a few minutes, or he

must have overheard her talking of it. There is no trusting Deb. She must gossip to every one that calls ; and she will not gossip softly," said Clare. And Mr. Harben believed her. How could he do anything else but believe in a woman who certainly never gossiped, and obeyed his directions better than any one to whom he had ever given them. He asked her if her master had any idea that his wife had come foully by her end. Clare said no. To the last she was determined to make the best fight she could ; and with that purpose she added, " I do n't yet believe that he is so sensible as you think for, sir. He wanders, at times, in the night. I would n't place too much faith in anything he says. If he were quite himself do you think he would take Mrs. Thornton's death so easily ?"

Mr. Harben himself was of opinion that his patient's brain was now clear, but he only saw him twice in the twenty-four hours

—this woman was with him night and day, and she was clever—very. Mr. Harben was inclined to defer greatly to her judgment; therefore he gave her words their full weight, and repeated them to Temple Masters, who smiled.

“For some reason—which I think I can guess—and which, before long, may give all the good people in Wearmouth a better *bonne bouche* in the way of gossip than they have had for one while, this respectable young woman does not wish me to see her patient. I’m all the more anxious to do so, and should prefer it if you’d certify him to be well enough to see a magistrate at the same time.”

“That would put the finishing stroke to the case, as far as the brain is concerned. Everything, even now, depends upon his being kept in the utmost quiet. I won’t answer for the consequences if you even let him know that his wife’s death arose from

any cause but accident. They were not too happy together; but still, the very name of murder would startle stronger nerves than Mr. Thornton's were at the best of times."

Temple Masters came in, then, by Mr. Thornton's permission, simply, as Mr. Harben said, to ask him some particulars respecting the unhappy accident by which Mrs. Thornton had come to her end. "You must learn all you can from him in that manner," said the doctor; "and I don't believe, myself, that any way he can tell you very much."

Mr. Thornton wondered what this visit meant. If they supposed his wife had died by an accident, why should they want to learn more about it? And what had this man from London—a barrister, he believed—to do with the matter? Had he not seen him with Audley Dale? Had *he* got him to come? Was he seeking to know if

indeed he had been the means of destroying the woman he had pretended to love? Did he think to avenge her? Let him, if he wished! He would tell no falsehoods; but surely even the man who had lured her to sin would not be vile enough to wish her to rest in a dishonoured grave. If there was one thing in which it was possible that both husband and paramour could join, surely it would be in preserving some faint vestige of repute to that poor perished thing.

“What did you want with me?” he said, when Temple Masters entered. “You must have some very urgent motive to bring you here at a time like this.”

“Yes, it is urgent,” said Temple Masters—then turning to Clare, who sat at a little distance, and was at that everlasting crochet edging—how many yards of it had she done while in the sick room!—“I won’t

detain you, I should like to be alone with your master."

"I would rather not leave him, if you please, sir," said Clare. "Mr. Harben gave him into my charge, and I was to be sure and see that he did not become over excited through talking to you."

"Very well—if you did n't listen on one side the door, I suppose you would on the other," said Temple carelessly; then he turned to Mr. Thornton. "My motives are very urgent, sir, or I would not only have shrunk from trespassing on you at such a time, but from alluding to a subject so painful as that of which I must now speak. Mrs. Thornton has disappeared—I won't say died—though the general belief is that she came to her end in the old Fort. I am aware that some one has been found there who is supposed to be your wife, but it is only a supposition. I am convinced Mrs.

Thornton is living still—that a stranger has been taken for her, and that our best chance of regaining her rests in your giving me any clue you can as to the cause of her disappearance. Was there any difference between you? Did she consider herself aggrieved—justly or unjustly matters not, and have you not good reason to believe that she is with her relatives—waiting, possibly, for you to make some overtures of reconciliation which your unfortunate illness has rendered impossible? Can I make those overtures on your behalf? Can I assist you in any way? I am not altogether disinterested in this. Scandal has connected her name with that of one of my friends. He is so situated that this scandal may affect him cruelly. It is of the utmost importance to him to have this cleared up. I shall shrink from no trouble that may enable me to do it. Will you empower me to act? Will you give me

the necessary information that will enable me to do so?"

Harold Thornton looked at him dreamily. What did this man mean that he was talking thus of the possibility of his wife's being yet alive? What strange delusion possessed him? And yet he looked sane and calm enough. As if a weak, frail woman could have struggled back to life from that awful stronghold where he had left her, caged and prisoned, waiting for her doom? As if the women who had served her for years would not have known whether or no the form the waters had at last yielded up was that of their mistress or no? Did this other man love her so well that he would not accept her death as possible? Was that why this story had been framed and repeated to him, so that he might give some clue to guide him to her? Perhaps he had looked upon the decaying lineaments that had been rescued

from the deep and had said in his horror at their ghastliness that *that* could not be the woman he had loved—not those the eyes whose light he had revelled in—not those the lips his once had pressed in the very hearing of the husband he had wronged! Let him learn the truth. Let him learn that she was torn from him at last—gone where passion should never tempt, nor sin soil her more. Ay! if that were all—let him learn everything, and that this woman might have been living still, happy and honoured in her rightful place, had it not been that he had lowered her to depths from which death alone could raise her.

He looked Temple Masters full in the face, and with white lips said—

“I can give you no help to bring her back; she is gone where no mortal hand can reach her; I can send no message by you that she will heed. One Voice alone can ever raise her now. You say that she

is living, and I tell you that I know that you speak falsely. My wife is gone where all the scandal busy tongues can speak will never reach her more !”

“I think you are mistaken,” said Temple Masters gently. “I have seen her whom they called by the name of your wife, and I am convinced that they are mistaken.”

“There is no mistake !” said Clare steadily. “I have seen her too, and I think, Mr. Masters, I should know Mrs. Thornton better than you.”

“You had better go, Clare,” said Mr. Thornton. “I shall not want you while this gentleman is here.”

Clare left the room—she would not dispute the matter with her master—and Mr. Thornton then turning to Temple Masters, said—“She is quite right. My wife died in the old Fort.”

How did he know it—how could he be so sure of it ? Temple Masters felt his belief

in the evidence of his own eye-sight as regarded Mrs. Thornton's identity shaken. Was Clare right after all, or had she influenced her master to believe as she wished him? And how was it that he bore the knowledge with such wonderful calmness? They had not been happy together he believed, but that would hardly account for the utter insensibility Mr. Thornton manifested. Then it flashed across him that if indeed Clare was right, and the dead woman he had seen yesterday was her former mistress, she had come foully by her end—stricken down, so the medical witnesses averred, by a blow which had caused her death. A blow that might have been given in sudden passion—on the impulse of an angry moment—in some mad fit of jealousy! Had he discovered the secret there? Found the clue to all this mystery. Had Mrs. Thornton died by her husband's hand? Was it possible that the jealousy which he had

nourished had at last wrought him up to this, and that the poor vain thing had indeed paid so dear a penalty for her folly?

He could only feel pity, not anger, for the man before him. He must have suffered so awfully before he did this thing. How was it that he did not suffer now? Had his illness prostrated him too utterly, or was the mind affected? If the last was the fact, Temple knew that now he should hear the truth. He felt that for the man before him it would be an easier thing to commit a murder than to tell a lie.

“You seem very sure of it,” he said, after a pause; “so sure that one would almost think you knew how Mrs. Thornton came by her end. Were you with her when she died?”

The other turned away. “What right have you to come and ask these questions? She is dead—is not that enough? What more should any one want to know?”

“How it was she *came to die*. By accident or otherwise? It is believed that it was *not* accident. It is possible that if it is not ascertained in what manner she met her death, sooner or later the guilt of it may be laid at the door of one who might, notwithstanding his innocence, suffer unjustly. There are suspicions afloat even now—I believe them unfounded—and yet, if they are not dispersed, they may cost an innocent man his life. Mr. Thornton, can you help to clear them up?”

“To whom do these suspicions point?”

“To Audley Dale. He was seen leaving the Fort the day your wife went there.”

“The villain! and he did go after all.” Harold Thornton’s pale face became suffused. Some men, wronged as he imagined he had been, would have felt tempted to keep their peace, and let the tempter who had wrought their hurt suffer for the crime which he at least had caused indirectly.

No such thought occurred to this one. Let him be punished in knowing the misery he had caused; the righteous end that had met his victim. That would be just and right, but other penalty, such as the law would mete out, and men award, he had not incurred.

“Yes, he went, and therefore the good people about here have thought fit to impute a crime to him which, to those who know him, it seems the sheerest absurdity to lay to his charge. I don’t believe him guilty for one instant. Mr. Thornton, do you?”

“No—not of blood-guiltiness—not of having laid hands on that poor sinner, but of other guilt which led the way to her death, by making death the only way of escape from a sinful life—of that I hold him culpable.”

“We won’t go into that now. I believe you wrong him on that point as much as

many wrong him on the other. But let that rest for the present. If he is not answerable for your wife's death—who is? Can you tell me that?"

"In one way he is answerable. If it had not been for him, that poor creature might be living yet."

"And for what you thought her guiltiness, you condemned and punished her? Is that what you mean to imply?"

"What else was there for her?" said Harold Thornton wearily. "She would not leave her sin—she was too impenitent to accept forgiveness, or to own her need of it. Was not any death better than a shameful life?"

"And that which comes after life?"

"God will judge her—God will help her there. What *could* I do but place her with Him? How *could* I let her live on—shameless and sinning?"

Was he mad? Had the overwrought

brain yielded at last? Temple Masters believed it must be so, and yet that this confession was not the result of madness. He was hearing the truth—he felt sure of that. He might have been mad when he did the thing of which he spoke. He was not mad now that he was speaking of it.

“I do not wish the man who led her into her sin to suffer at man’s hands—perhaps I might say her death lies virtually at his door, and he deserves all that man would mete out to him if indeed he had held her down under the waters as they flowed in, or left her in the darkest and the deepest place the Fort held, to perish. But he will suffer enough without that—at least I should think so. I don’t know—he may be hardened and impenitent in his sin, and this my dead wife, who was my all, may be only one of many victims. There are such men. Still, I would not lend myself to a lie. He did his best to slay my wife’s soul,

to poison her heart, and turn it from me, but what men call murder he did *not* do."

"And you——?"

"If I had loved her less, I might have let her live. But how could I? how could I? To see her sinking lower and lower into pollution, till not one healthy spot remained in all her soul! How was it possible for me to spare her? How could I pause when death would come in and purify and purge—lifting her out of the slough of filth into which she had fallen, and setting her feet where no tempter would ever lead them astray again?"

"But how did you dare take judgment and vengeance both into your own hands?" said Temple Masters, with a face almost as pale as that of the man to whom he was speaking.

"How did I dare! Was I not her lord, her head?—had she not sinned against me? For such a crime as hers, in how many lands

death is thought not too great a punishment! But it was not that which influenced me! Only I could not let her live and soil my name and hearth by her sin. And she would not put it away! she scoffed at my forgiveness! And I would have overlooked the past, and taken her back to me as if she had never erred. And she would not have it so. Then what was there left for me? If I put her away, she would not put away her sin. If I kept her with me, I should be letting a harlot pass amongst pure women as one of them, and sanctioning her infamy. There was no other thing that I could do than tell her, this life that she had shamed she should lead no more."

"God help you! You misjudged her."

"No, you are wrong there. You will never convince me of that. But—but—there is one thing you must promise me. If need be that this avowal of mine is made

public, spare her name. There is no need to speak of motives. Is it not enough for me to say that I know how she came by her death, and that Audley Dale was not with her when I left her where I knew, within another hour, the water would flow in and cover her? I should not have spoken to you of her guilt—but you are his friend. Doubtless he has told you at times of his victory, plumed and gloried himself in his conquest. But you must screen her. I will never open my lips again if you do n't promise that."

"Your wife's good name is safe enough with me."

"You look like an honest man. I do n't think *he* looked like a villain—and yet he ruined our two lives. I wonder if I have done well in trusting you so much."

His voice faltered—he was evidently the worse for the interview. Temple Masters went to the door—"I must learn what

more I can from him to-morrow, poor fellow!" he thought, and called for Clare. She came from downstairs—she might have been listening at the door, but at any rate she had saved appearances. She came in, looked at her master, then turned—"You have done him harm enough, Mr. Masters, I think you had better leave him to me now."

Temple went away. "I must come to-morrow," he thought; "and have Harben himself present, if he won't let me have a magistrate, but it ought to be the latter. I shall clear Dale after all; but at what a price! I do n't envy him when he hears what his philandering with that poor foolish thing has cost. And to think that that foul, unsightly thing was she! *That* the face which drove that poor fellow mad with jealousy! I can hardly believe it now, and yet there is no thinking otherwise, after what I have just heard."

He went his way, and Clare bent over her patient.

“He has nigh done for him,” she thought, “and no great harm either. What a fool he was to hear all that he has heard, alone. It might have made all the difference to Mr. Audley Dale, if his clever friend had had the sense to bring some one with him ; but I reckon he did n’t expect to hear quite as much as he did. This story can’t be told to-morrow ; he’ll never be able to go through with it again,” she thought, looking keenly at her patient, on whose forehead the drops were fast rising, and over whose face, a change, almost like that of death, was spreading. She considered—“Shall I send for Mr. Harben ?” Clare hated slighting her work, and her master just now was her work, and yet if he were to die, or relapse into unconsciousness before the morrow, what a difference it would make to all those well-laid schemes of hers.

The only conscience she had was one which impelled her to do everything she did thoroughly. It was a relief to that conscience when she remembered that Mr. Harben would be with Mrs. Partridge, who was likely to require him till nightfall. "It's no use sending for him, he won't like to come unless I tell him things are at the worst, and I can hardly say that ; I'll give the drops, I think he ought to have those."

She went to the mantelpiece, and took up a bottle. Mr. Harben had told her that if the patient showed signs of extreme exhaustion after his interview with Mr. Masters, so many drops were to be administered to him ; so many more at certain intervals during the night, if the exhaustion continued.

"We have got him up the hill so far," he had said, "and we must not let him down again if we can help it."

Clare's hand shook a little as she took

the bottle. After all, she had a woman's nerves about her if she had not much else that was womanly, and possibly if she *had* been waiting outside the bedroom door, while her master was speaking to Temple Masters, she might have heard enough to try even her nerves a little. "I'll give it him," she said as she took the bottle; "thanks to that meddling fool, he wants it badly enough."

She took a wine-glass in her other hand, but before a single drop had left the bottle it dropped out of her shaking fingers—dropped and broke. "Wasted," said Clare, and wiped it hastily up, then collected the pieces of glass, and threw them amongst the ashes of the grate. "Shall I send for another bottle?" she asked herself; "but who is there to send to? Mr. Harben is at Mrs. Partridge's, and his assistant is n't to be trusted to sell a pennyworth of sticking plaister. It's no use sending to *him*; it's

a pity, but I must let things be as they are ; I think he 'll do till the morning—I think he'll do," and then she glanced at the bed where her master's profile showed wan, and sharp, and waxen as that of a corpse, and the thin wasted outlines of his form looked as if laid out for their last repose. " I think he'll do," said Clare a little more tremulously, " I'll give him his other mixture when the time comes, and I'll tell Deb she must come and stay in this room with me to-night."

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE PIER.

THE next morning Temple Masters was feeling much more hopeful about the case Miss Beatey Layton had entrusted to his hands than he had yet done. "We must get that poor fellow to repeat his story before a magistrate," he thought, "as soon as Harben will give permission for it. I'll call on him again while he's at breakfast."

He did so, but found Mr. Harben by no means disposed to facilitate his wishes. "You have done more harm," he said irritably, "than I shall undo in a month—if

indeed, I undo it at all. My patient is utterly prostrated—speechless, and unconscious—if you, or any one else speak to him on this side the assizes, he'll be a murdered man, and I'll throw up the responsibility of assisting in murder. I half thought how it would be, and went round this morning as soon as I was up. They were afraid he would be gone in the night, and had thought of sending for me, but however, he's still living, and that's as much as one can say. You must make the best use of whatever he told you yesterday. I should think he knew what he was about when he was saying it, but one can hardly be sure of that—these cases vary from hour to hour."

"Do n't you think in a week——?"

"I tell you it's just a question whether he'll be alive in a week, certainly not able to utter a dozen words distinctly. If you could only realize his utter prostration, and

the harm you have done him—but perhaps I ought not to blame you ; it was my own fault, after all ; I should not have allowed you access to him.”

There was nothing to be done to-day—it might not be possible to do anything before the assizes.

“ Things are looking badly,” he thought, “ I do n’t think they ’ll convict him—I do n’t see how they can ; but he ’ll leave the court a banned and ruined man. Harold Thornton’s confession, if well authenticated, would have cleared him, as nothing else can. Of course I shall make some use of it, try if I can’t get the jury to think Mr. Thornton was as likely to kill his wife as Audley Dale. If he lives, he may yet do him justice, but it seems very doubtful whether he will live to any purpose.”

He walked moodily along, and presently encountered Miss Lisdale and Beatey.

Milly was looking pale and worn ; Beatey as triumphant and glowing as ever. She had not the slightest doubt but that Audley would "pull through." Forgive her the slang—she looked so charming while uttering it. Was he not in Temple Masters' hands, and was not Temple strong enough to help any, and every one, out of all their difficulties ? She held out her hand to him, with just a little blush. "We're allowed out ; Mrs. Rushington is tired of playing duenna," she said, softly. "We've had a modified version of this 'shocking affair' told us, as we must necessarily learn something of it as soon as we stepped out of doors. Have you any good news for us ? I hope so. Do what I will, I can't persuade Milly that things must go right. They'd never convict a bishop's son, you know. It would be enough to bring Church and State down in one great crash."

They were by the Pier now, and the two girls went on to it, Temple Masters following them. They were likely to have it all to themselves this November day, and they paced backwards and forwards, wrapped up in their plaids from the wind, and listening eagerly to what Temple Masters had to tell them.

“They won’t convict him,” he said, gravely. “I don’t see that there is sufficient evidence for that, but conviction in such a matter is not all a man has to dread. I have thought it right to tell Audley what I think of matters, and, unless we can find that Mrs. Thornton is still living, and I own my belief in that fact is not so strong as it was yesterday, or bring her death clearly home to some one else, Audley Dale will have to suffer a penalty, almost as great to one in his position, as conviction would be in a lower.”

“You mean,” said Milly, “that the dis-

grace, the stain, the supposed guilt, will rest upon him?"

"I do; the legal evidence will not be sufficient; I do n't see how they can make it so; but it is not legal evidence that society will judge and condemn him by."

"I understand you," said Milly. They were at the extreme end of the Pier now, and had stopped mechanically, as people were in the habit of stopping when there, as if to look about them. There was nothing in all that wide expanse of ocean, with here and there a ship breaking its vast monotony, or in the grey sunless sky above, to tempt the eye to-day. All was chill, bare, bleak, and hopeless. Milly Lisdale, not an imaginative girl, felt it so, as she leaned against the railings of the Pier. What a woful difference from that bright sunny day, when, amidst flowers and sunshine, with laughter and music filling the air, she had plighted her faith

to the man of whom she was now hearing, that if he lived, he was likely to be a virtual outcast, a social outlaw. She could not have put this in words. She was hardly conscious how much the chill dreariness of the outlook and the atmosphere depressed her, how it weighed her down, and made her feel that even Temple Masters, let him do his best, would be powerless to give her lover, not his life, but that which alone would make life worth having.

“He will live it down,” said Temple. “He must live it down, but I am afraid it will be a long time first; and on that point I have something to tell you. Audley feels this disgrace; feels, too, perhaps, that it is in some measure owing to the folly with which I have acquainted you. He was glad and thankful at hearing that you no longer judged him guilty of something that might have been worse than folly.

How glad and thankful, it would be hard for me to say. But he feels he dares not, he ought not, to take advantage of your goodness. Until he can offer you a name with no stain resting on it, he will never avail himself of your generous confidence. I think, myself, it is the only course left open to him as a man of honour."

"I thought he would say that. I thought that would be the message you would bring me," said Milly. "But things must be as they were. I don't go back from my word. When Mr. Dale leaves his prison, I am ready to keep it. There are other places than England to live in. He may make a career for himself elsewhere, if one is closed to him here."

She had made up her mind to this, evidently. In her quiet, sensible, unromantic fashion, determined on the sacrifice; and yet she knew what such a sacrifice meant. There was no romance, no enthusiasm in

her case, as there would have been in Beatey's, to throw a glow over the hard dry fact, that in marrying Audley Dale, she would marry a man who would be virtually banished from his native land. She knew that all the bright rosy future she had pictured, could never be realized now. Audley, if he left the prison, would have to leave his regiment too. For all practical purposes he would be ostracised, and have to spend his life either in some cheap French watering-place, or else try if he could make a new career for himself in Canada or New Zealand. It was so different from the life that she had painted, from the life that she would have delighted to lead, and for which she was adapted; as different as this dull, grey day, with the sunless sky, and cold, unsmiling sea, was from that other one she remembered so well, and which now seemed so long ago. But she was going to keep her word

—Audley, after all, had done nothing for which she ought to break it. He had done a very foolish thing, but he had, at least, not sinned against her ; he had done nothing for which he ought to suffer at her hands.

“ Things are to be just as they were, between us,” she said presently. “ All that has been, all that may be, will make no difference there.” Then she began to talk of other things : of the line of defence that Audley would take, of the solicitor it would be best to employ. She talked ignorantly, as a girl might well do, who was seldom allowed even a sight of a newspaper, and Temple Masters did not choose to tell her anything connected with his interview with Harold Thornton last night. But she talked sensibly too, and what information Temple did choose to give her, was evidently bestowed on an appreciative listener.

She walked on first when they left the Pier—it might be for the sake of leaving Beatey and her lover together for a few minutes—and then Beatey turned to him : “Just tell *me* the truth. Of course you’ll get him off? I’ve always understood that. But do you mean to say that he will really be affected so seriously by this trial? Good gracious ! if it were not for the disgrace to his family, they might as well put an end to him at once.”

“He’ll have to live this thing down,” said Temple, gravely ; “and it takes a long time to live a false accusation down—as many a man has found before—and I don’t think he can live it down in England. He must go abroad. He ought to give her up. He seemed inclined to think so himself, and I confirmed him in the idea. He has no business to marry her now.”

“She will marry him, and she won’t be given up,” said Beatey. “I would n’t if I

were in her place. Not that I can conceive the possibility of your ever having written letters to Miss Clare ; and it seems to me all this mischief arises from his having done so. She'll just take him now, because he'll want her more than ever. But you'll see ; let them go where they will, Milly will make something of him, and without her he would never have been anything. Still, I don't envy her the task. I should n't care to have such material to mould."

"I think you have set yourself one quite as hard, when you talk of mounting into a garret, and accommodating yourself to the *vie du pays*."

"Yes, but my mounting into the garret is only the prelude to your ascending the woolsack. Please to let that be always understood. But there ! I'm ashamed to be talking like this, with Milly, walking alone, in her misery, before us. What right has one to be happy when one looks

at her? But I hope you quite understand, sir, that our bargain does not hold good unless you clear Audley completely. I could n't go to the garret if Milly goes abroad."

"I shall keep you to your bargain, in any case," said Temple. "That is made, and we do n't go back from it."

Then Milly stopped, and Beatey went up to her. Something Temple heard her say in a low, caressing tone, and then she turned round and said, "Good-bye. Come to-night to the garden wall," she whispered, softly, and so led Milly on. Temple went his way back to his hotel, thinking what a blessed chance it was that made the Milly Lisdales of this world for ever take under their protecting love the Audley Dales.

"If it were not for some such providential instinct we should die out from sheer feebleness, or there would be two distinct races, and the stronger would infallibly destroy

the weaker. She'll do as Beatey says—she will marry him as soon after he leaves prison as she comes of age ; and, what is more, she'll make something of him that he never would have been without her.”

CHAPTER XV.

THE BISHOP'S TROUBLES.

ON arriving at his hotel, Temple Masters saw, at the door, a figure which at the first glance struck him as familiar ; which at the second he recognized as that of Mr. Price. Price was looking so respectable, his broad-cloth was so good and so black, his neck-tie so white and so carefully tied, that, if it had not been for a certain over-importance of manner, the waiters, and even the master of the hotel, might have taken him for a dean or a rector at the least. Price was on the look-out for Mr.

Temple Masters, and as soon as he saw him accosted him eagerly.

“Can I speak to you alone, sir? I’ve been waiting for you this hour. We came in—his lordship and I—this morning. Started off as soon as we had your letter. We felt that we must speak to you about this melancholy event—that we should lose no time in consulting you. His lordship’s upstairs, with some lunch. I prevailed on him to try their sherry. He’s quite overdone by this dreadful affair. Is n’t there a private room where I could see you to hear a little more of the particulars?”

“If his lordship’s in one I’ll see him there, Price. I do n’t know that I need go over the particulars with you as well as with him.”

“I thought I would prepare his lordship,” said Price. “What this intelligence has been to him it is impossible for any one to conceive. Mr. Maurice is with him, sir.

We wrote yesterday, desiring him to meet us, and Mr. Maurice is with him. We found him here on our arrival. But he is not—he certainly is not,” said Price, mournfully, “the comfort that we might have expected him to be to his lordship under the present trying circumstances.”

Price went up first, with a mournful dignity that was all his own, to usher Temple Masters into his lordship’s presence. He would have liked, if Mr. Masters could but have been brought to see how desirable it was that he should be so, to have been consulted by that gentleman in the present melancholy state of affairs; to have said what it would be advisable to do, and what to refrain from doing; to have hinted how much the Bishop could bear, and how much it would be best to spare him. Such an avalanche of misfortune had fallen on his lordship, that Price felt as if he must try and stand with uplifted hands to keep it,

if possible, from weighing his master down completely.

The Bishop was in one of the best sitting-rooms of the hotel. He had desired Price not to let the people of the inn know who he was, and Price had answered that they would certainly recognise his lordship, who had so lately been a visitor in that part of the world. But perhaps none of the people at the inn were church-goers, and so had not heard the Bishop preach the charity sermon two months ago, or maybe they thought so little of a bishop, unless he was a customer, that they had forgotten all about his lordship's recent advent in Wear-mouth. Certain it is, that they had not recognized him ; but, still, Price's manner and bearing were such that they could not fail to be impressed by the fact that in entertaining his master they were honoured, and they had therefore ushered him at once into their most ornate guest-chamber ; and,

at the luncheon which Price had ordered, displayed their best silver.

It all mattered very little to the Bishop. He was sitting by the table, making a pretence to eat. Maurice had drunk a glass or two of the sherry which had been ordered for "the good of the house," and they were trying to talk over matters, and see what they could make of the terrible difficulty which had overcome them. They were unable to cope with it. It mastered them completely. It was a bewildering horror — a great overwhelming tragedy which had come into the smooth commonplace of their decorous lives, and which they could neither understand nor grapple with. The Bishop had obeyed his impulses and Price's advice, and hurried off from the Palace to Wearmouth, thinking that in one way or another his very presence there must benefit his son. But now he was there it seemed he could do nothing—

nothing but sit and make believe to eat lunch, and wait for Temple Masters to come and tell him what else there was for him to do.

Maurice was pretty well as helpless as his father. He had hurried from Tring that morning as soon as the post had brought him the letter desiring him to meet the Bishop at Wearmouth; but now he had come, what could he do?—only tell his Lordship that he had seen Audley the day before, and that he was in as good spirits as could be expected of him; that if Temple Masters took the thing up, and went on with it, he would be sure to pull him through; and then sit and sip the dry sherry, and crumble up pellets of bread, and wish Temple would come in and put an end to the *tête-à-tête* with his father.

What could he talk about? What could they say one to the other? The consolations with which people in a lower class

might have solaced themselves were denied to them. They could take no comfort from the thought that Audley was innocent—they had assumed that, too much as a matter of course, to do so. They could not derive much satisfaction from the belief that even if convicted, the last penalty of the law would not be enforced—they had never imagined that it would be—that fate was too wildly improbable for them to dream of its befalling any one connected with them. But there was the certainty of the disgrace, the talk, the publicity ; and the possibility—just the possibility that a besotted jury might bring in a verdict of guilty, and so necessitate an application on the part of Audley's relatives for a pardon which would be an indelible stigma on them all for life.

They were fairly bewildered. This thing which had happened to them was so out of the way of their ordinary experiences—with

all its tragic horror, there was an element of coarseness and vulgarity in it, with which they had never contemplated that any sorrow or trouble likely to befall them, could possibly be allied. They were brought down to the level of the common herd at once; and with all his Utopian Radicalism, Maurice Dale was sufficiently a patrician to feel this almost as keenly as his father, to whose unstained, decorous life, the event that had happened was a shock so great, that even yet, in its full extent, it was almost incredible.

They looked eagerly to Temple Masters when he came in. Price followed him. If Price had not been allowed to prepare his master for this interview, at any rate he was going to support him through it. He came up to the Bishop now, and poured him out a half tumbler of wine diluted with a little water, and the other drank it, and then turned to Temple Masters.

“ I had your letter yesterday, and I came this morning ; I suppose this most miserable affair is in all the papers, even the London ones ? ”

“ Yes, I think so ; it is a matter they would not be likely to pass over.”

“ Won’t—won’t you take luncheon ? ” and the Bishop pointed to the well-spread table. There was the honour, if not the life of his son at stake, but still the conventionalities must be observed—even Price felt this as he said, “ Sherry or claret, sir ? ”

Temple declined both food and wine, and the Bishop leaning back, looked mournfully at Maurice. Perhaps his conscience smote him as he regarded the son who, before this, had been such a thorn in his side. What were his outbreaks ? what was all the publicity he had incurred—all his aberrations and deviations from the safe and well-ordered course in which his father had thought fit to move, to this ? His heart

warmed to his elder son as it had not done for years ; in sight of this greater sin, he felt as if he could forgive all *his* minor ones.

“ And what is to be done ? ” said the Bishop, speaking feebly, as if he were a far older man than he really was. “ Won’t they take bail—I suppose they would accept mine ? ”

His lordship had to learn that there are some offences for which the local magistrates cannot take bail. Audley was in Wearmouth gaol, and, so far as they were concerned, there he must remain till taken to St. Bede’s for the assizes. Temple told his father so—Price stood aghast when he heard him.

“ And—and what is to be done then ? ” said the Bishop.

“ Put the case in the hands of Thompson of St. Bede’s, he’s the best man there for this sort of thing, he has nearly all the criminal practice ; there are older men, and

of a higher standing, but for this sort of thing he is the best."

"I suppose you'll take the case," said Maurice. "I do n't know," he added, turning to his father, "that it could be in better hands."

"I suppose not," said the Bishop, "I suppose not, if such matters are in Mr. Masters' way."

"Thorpe or Jolliffe ought to be your leader," said Temple, "if you want a great name on your side; but I have no objection to act as junior, and think I may be of use in that capacity. Would you like me to put the case in Thompson's hands at once; it's as well to lose no time, and there are two or three matters on which I should like to talk to him?"

"I'll leave it all to you," said the Bishop, "I'll leave it all to you; we could n't do better, could we?" he said, turning to Maurice, whose opinion on any point, a few

months back, he would have thought worse than valueless. Maurice assented—so did Price ; quite respectfully, but as if his opinion were worth something in the matter too.

“ You’ll draw on me,” said the Bishop, “ for whatever may be needed. I don’t understand these matters. All this is so utterly new and strange—but whatever money may be wanted, of course you will look to me for.” Then, after a pause, he added, “ How does Miss Lisdale bear this ? What view do her family take of the matter ?”

Ah dear ! things were so different since the time the Bishop had looked scorn on Miss Lisdale’s family. Their opinion now was very important to him. Would they stand by his son, or hold aloof ? He looked anxiously at Temple, who replied—

“ I have n’t seen Mrs. Rushington since I came down here ; but Miss Lisdale has but

one view of the matter, and that is a firm conviction of Audley's innocence, and a belief that, let what will happen, nothing can occur which will induce her to break her engagement."

"Very honourable—very nice," said the Bishop; he was quite comforted, evidently, by Milly's constancy. "I wish I were equal to calling on the young lady and her mamma; but I must return to-night, and it would, perhaps, be only paining them as well as myself to make their first acquaintance at such a time."

"Just so," said Temple, "if you'll allow me, I'll convey your apologies and regrets to Mrs. Rushington and her daughter, and I shall start this evening for St. Bede's, and place matters in Mr. Thompson's hands."

"Thank you, thank you; and you'll convey my kind regards to Miss Lisdale. She must come to the Palace when—when all this is over, and make acquaintance with

Audley's sisters. I—I won't go on to Audley—I—don't think it's necessary, and I could do no good."

"Too much for his lordship, decidedly," said Price emphatically. Temple Masters assented; he saw that the poor old man shrank from the publicity that must attach to the visit. People would stare and talk. A bishop going to see his son in prison! And they would look closely at the Bishop, and watch his every look and word, and the report of his visit would get into the papers, and there might be comments on it; possibly a leading article. If only the Bishop had been still Rector of Shoreleigh! If he had not been set in high places, so that whatever disgrace attached to him would be seen by a whole kingdom! Temple Masters quite understood it.

"There is no necessity," he said, "I will tell Audley exactly how things are;" then he had a little more talk, and presently

left the Bishop, to pack up his valise, and start for St. Bede's. "I shall spend the night there," he said; "I dare say Thompson and I shall be too long talking over this matter for me to return here to-night."

And when he was gone, Price made his master take some food, and then got him into the carriage, and they drove to the station, the Bishop feeling so far satisfied that at least he had done the best he could for his son; and Maurice went back with him to Drowsehead, the father, in his forlornness, taking what comfort he could from the son that was still spared to him.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHECKMATE.

WHEN the train stopped at St. Bede's that evening, Temple Masters lost no time in making his way to the offices of Mr. Thompson. He had great faith in that gentleman. As he had told the Bishop, there were older men, and men of more repute in St. Bede's, but none so ready to make the best of a weak case, and to bring out the strong points of a good one, as Mr. Thompson. He was a rising man—they looked shyly on him at St. Bede's as yet—old Mr. Chastelar, who had all the County business, especially; but Temple Masters, who had worked with him, knew

his value, and felt that in such a case as this, Mr. Thompson would do better than any man in St. Bede's.

Mr. Thompson lived over his offices, but business was over for the day, and the clerks gone, and he sitting down to dinner when Temple Masters came to the house. He asked him to join him in the repast, and Temple, who would have done well to have lunched with the Bishop ; having, as it was, eaten nothing but a biscuit since his breakfast ; was very ready to accept the invitation.

They were alone, Mr. Thompson being a bachelor. He was only about thirty—as the Bishop had said, he was young—a small, wiry, keen-faced man, with a quiet, energetic manner, which in itself was calculated to reassure a weak or timid client. His house was large—too large for a bachelor, but he was going to bring a mistress home to it before long, and it looked imposing

and professional now. It was in a bad street, for one small house after another had crept up to it, so that at last it looked quite out of keeping with its surroundings. In its day it had been a mansion of some importance, and inhabited by people connected with the local aristocracy. But half its garden had been taken away, and small streets had crept up to its rear, so that from being one of the quietest houses in the town, it was now one of the noisiest.

It suited Mr. Thompson however. The street being narrow and small, his house shone out conspicuously — a leviathan amongst its neighbours—it was impossible to overlook it, and owing to the constant stream of traffic passing by, equally impossible for a great many people not to be aware that ‘Lawyer’ Thompson, as many of the dwellers in St. Bede’s were apt to term its legal practitioners, lived there. Every

one in St. Bede's knew where to find him if they wanted him.

Neither Temple nor he said much while they were at dinner. They were both hungry and tired, but when the meal was over Mr. Thompson drew up to the fire, produced some cigars, put a bottle of port on the table—the dinner had been plain, but the wine and cigars were of the best—and, asking Temple to draw up too, proposed that they should go into matters.

Temple did so at once, and the other listened attentively. He heard everything—the other knew better than to tell him half—and when Temple had concluded, Mr. Thompson took his cigar out of his mouth, and observed quietly, “It’s an awkward case, but it’s not a murder; or at least, Mrs. Thornton has n’t been made the subject of one.”

“That was my own opinion till I had heard her husband’s confession, but I do n’t

see, after that, how it's possible to have any doubt on the subject."

"I shouldn't have any doubt either; only, from all you tell me, this Clare seems to have no scruples at swearing to anything which will imperil her former lover. By-the-bye, you didn't tell me—is the hussy good-looking?"

"Plain, and marked with the smallpox."

"She must have had some brains, or Mr. Audley Dale must have been a hopeless fool to have committed himself so far."

"She *has* brains—but there are wiser men in the world than Audley Dale."

"And Mrs. Thornton?"

"Good-looking still, though *passée*. A woman who knew how to dress, and to make the most of herself."

"I wish you would describe her. Please to go more fully into particulars. Be as minute as you please. Can you tell me anything of her antecedents?"

“A music-teacher or governess, I believe. Mrs. Rushington always doubted she sang much too well for a lady. You certainly don’t often hear such a voice or such execution in a drawing-room. Her manner, too, savoured just a little of the stage—pale, with good features, dark hair, and abundance of it—all her own too, I should say—fine dark eyes, which she was in the habit of making rather too much use of.”

“They were not happy together you say, she and her husband?”

“Not recently—not since the poor devil became possessed with this craze of jealousy.”

“I should say she was just the woman to play him a trick in return for the one he had tried to play her. Make her way out of the Fort, and leave him with the pleasing delusion that she had made her way out of the world. Why, her voice would get her a living anywhere.”

“I wish we could find it so. I’m ad-

vertising every day—if she's still living I hope, out of consideration to Mr. Dale, she'll turn-up before the assizes."

"It'll be awkward for him if she does n't. He won't be convicted, but he'll find it hard to clear himself of this in the eyes of the public." Then Mr. Thompson leaned back in his chair and was silent for a time, looking thoughtfully in the fire, and puffing his cigar leisurely. Presently he arose. "Shall we step across the road; I think we shall find it a little livelier there than here?"

"Across the road? *Cui bono?*"

"Did n't you know our theatre was my opposite neighbour? It's not good for much on ordinary occasions, being so badly supported, but it has passed into new hands lately. The manager seems to have a little enterprise in him. The company is a very fair one, and he has brought down for a couple of nights a great star from London.

He plays in the second piece. I think the first must be just over. Shall we go? We shall find it pleasanter than staying here."

"This is pleasant enough; but I've no objection. I did n't know, that as a rule, you cared for the dramatic art."

"I do n't generally. I was put on the free list by the former manager, and I found it expensive. He was very neighbourly—too much so. Everything I'd got he seemed to consider in the light of 'property.' He borrowed my lamps, and returned them with the glasses smashed. I got the glasses mended, and then they were borrowed again. My office furniture he seemed to consider quite as his own. From Faust's study, to a money-lender's counting-house, it always seemed to come in handy. I must say he always sent it back the next morning in time for business. I shall venture to furnish my drawing-room, now. I see this new man has a different idea of

managing matters. He has borrowed all his movables from the broker's round the corner, and means to do the thing handsomely. There's a Utrecht velvet dining-room suite gone in, and a set of chintz covered chairs, besides half-a-dozen tables, of various sizes, and a bedstead this afternoon. I've had to lend Othello a pillow before now. But this new man seems a man of substance. Will you come? By-the-bye, how tall did you say Mrs. Thornton was?"

"The middle height, and rather thin. What an interest you have in her personal appearance!"

"In case I should come across her, I should like to be able to recognize the lady. I only hope it won't be too late for Mr. Dale's interests."

They were now in the street. The theatre was an insignificant building, generally in a chronic state of embarrassment and decay. Dissent and the Low Church

were alike inimical to its interests. Concerts and concert-singers did well at St. Bede's. But the play-house and players were looked upon shyly by the stricter religionists, and regarded with a little contempt by those who were more lax in their ideas. To-night the theatre had made a great effort. Its display of gas and play-bills was almost metropolitan. At least a dozen carriages had driven up to the box entrance, and the pit was more than half full--an event which had not happened for the last twenty years.

The new manager had not been long in power. This was but the tenth night of his reign. People spoke well of him as an actor in broad farce, of his wife as a lady who took every part that nobody else was capable of filling, and performed them all equally well; but to-night, of course, the London star was the great attraction: even the fact that the leading lady, who would

play the heroine to his hero, was said to have a handsomer face and a better voice than had ever yet shone in the theatre at St. Bede's, did not excite half the interest that the great man did, who had come down express from London to delight a provincial audience.

"What part of the house are you going to?" asked Temple, as Mr. Thompson wound his way along a dark stone passage, and up some narrow, dirty stairs.

"A stage box will suit us best, if there's one to spare, and I expect they're all vacant. They'll let me have it half-price, now, and glad to get it off their hands at that."

He did, in fact, secure it at half the sum the boxes were specified at. They could n't afford to turn away money from the doors, and so Mr. Thompson obtained a box abutting on the stage, at his own price. It was a small theatre, faded and shabby.

The new manager, if he hired furniture instead of borrowing it, did not appear to have funds enough to decorate the house. The audience was, for St. Bede's, a good one, and in the dress circle there was a fine display of fresh young faces and opera cloaks. Mr. Thompson glanced carelessly round, recognized some faces, then shrank back. "One's not quite in trim for the boxes, and I do n't want people to see me here. But I like, when I do come to the play, to be near enough to see faces ; and the lady who takes the chief part with Eastern, to-night, is a client of mine. I want to see how she gets herself up for the stage. She's not bad looking off it."

"A client of yours? Why, she can't have been long in the town. I see this is her first appearance at St. Bede's," said Temple Masters, glancing at the programme. "I suppose you mean Miss Hilda Mor-daunt?"

“Yes ; but she is madame, not made-moiselle, and wants to be separated from her husband. She did n’t go into particulars, and I do n’t yet know her real name. She called on me, for the first time, this morning, and is to come again in a day or two, when, if she expects me to do her any good, she must be a little more communicative. The curtain’s drawing up. Look well at her. I should like to know your opinion of her.”

The opening piece was over when they entered, which perhaps had made it all the easier for Mr. Thompson to secure his box on the terms he had done. The band—three fiddles and a harp—now finished playing, and as the drop-scene was raised, the hero of the night, and of the piece, was discovered in solitary possession of the stage. There was a round of plaudits, during which Mr. Thompson observed, “He’s taking stock of the house. Does n’t

find it quite so full as he expected. That sort of thing must be trying to a fellow's conceit—or perhaps he'll console himself by setting down our non-appreciation of him to our crass stupidity. No, I sha'n't give him a hand. I'm saving all my energies for my client, as a matter of duty."

He had not to save them long. After one speech from the hero, and a little lively dialogue with a cross old steward, the heroine entered, and the pit, as a matter of gallantry, greeted her as warmly as it had done the great man from London. The boxes were cooler in their reception. Nobody knew anything certain of Miss Mordaunt. Great things had been said of her, but who knew, as yet, whether she was deserving that such things should be said? They were not afraid of committing themselves by applauding the great man whose position was secured, and whose name was known on the other side of the Atlantic, as

well as in his native country ; but they might commit themselves by applauding Miss Mordaunt—at any rate before it was seen what she could really do.

Mr. Thompson, however, was vigorous in his demonstrations. He sat facing the stage, so that as the lady came up it she could see how zealously he was exerting himself in her behalf ; and as she smiled and curtsied in recognition of the plaudits of the pit, she cast a grateful look at him, and when she gave her second curtsey made a slight inclination of the head towards his box, as if to show him how she appreciated his exertions.

Mr. Thompson clapped again. He had taken off his gloves, or rather, he had dispensed, when he left home, with putting any on, so that his plaudits were given with all the force of his two palms ; but, as he clapped, he looked curiously at Temple Masters, who, leaning back, with a puzzled,

wondering air, was regarding the actress with a deeper interest than she had excited in any one else.

Was it—was it—Henrietta Thornton ? Could it indeed be she—this woman who trod the stage as if she had been born to it ; whose every look and movement bespoke a mistress of the mimic art ; who had at her command all the wiles, and tricks, and tones of one accustomed for years to stand before the lights ? She was much more at home on the boards than he had ever seen her anywhere else. She had to enact a lady, and she was the stage lady to perfection. He remembered now how that thought had once crossed him with regard to Mrs. Thornton. Even the great man with whom she acted seemed pleased to have found a *camarade* worthy of him ; and when she sang, the pit redoubled its applause, and even the boxes deigned, this time, to use their white-gloved hands as vigorously as they had

done when the London star had first appeared.

How she seemed to enjoy the applause ! Temple Masters was near enough to perceive how it thrilled and animated her. Beneath her rouge her cheeks flushed up, and her eyes beamed with redoubled lustre. Her whole frame dilated, and her step grew more and more elastic. Her first song was encored, and she repeated it, and again won fresh plaudits. It was clear that she would divide the honours of the night with the London actor. She seemed herself to know it, and went on with her part with redoubled nerve and confidence. She was evidently happy while acting. It was no labour to her. This false artificial life, the heated air, the gas, but, above all, the plaudits, were her natural element. If this indeed was Henrietta Thornton, Temple Masters felt that in the Rectory of St. Hilda, and the life she had been condemned

to lead as its mistress, she must have suffered an unspeakable martyrdom. He had been inclined to think a little hardly of her at times ; he was full of admiration for her now. Seeing her in her native element, he was induced to credit her for having borne herself, on the whole, so well in one that was totally uncongenial.

He leaned back, keeping as much in the shade as possible. He had no wish to be recognized as yet. Mr. Thompson turned to him—" Well, what do you think of my client ? Is she like any one you have ever seen ?"

" Wonderfully like. Can you take me behind the scenes ?"

" No, but I'll take you to her house when it's over. She has asked me to supper—but do n't be alarmed. She lives with the manager and his wife. I fancy they are some relations. That's right—keep well back. We're pretty well in the shade

here. I don't think she'll see you, but she's evidently pleased to recognize me."

On the play went. The new actress and her coadjutor brought down the house. She sang again, and this time better even than at first. The theatre, being but a small one, did not tax her voice too much, and it had a freshness and a *timbre* in it, perhaps acquired by long rest. She was again encored—even the star from London seemed quite content to be eclipsed by this provincial luminary. When he led her forward before the curtain, and she curtsied her thanks to the audience, she looked fresh, bright, and happy. Mr. Eastern's compliments were sounding in her ears as well as the plaudits of the house. Mr. Eastern had said how much pleasure it gave him to have his exertions so warmly seconded—there was no knowing to what this might lead. Mr. Eastern's word was everything with a manager—

what might he not do for an actress whom he considered worthy to act with him ?

She was radiant as she stood there, with the pit applauding with all its might, and the gallery thundering its applause. She looked young and triumphant ; different altogether to the worn, tired woman whom Temple Masters remembered. Something of this look she had worn the night of the ball, but it had not been just the same. Underneath all her gaiety and *abandon* there had been a hardness and defiance, as if she felt that in enjoying herself so much as she was doing she was setting the conventionalities of the place at nought, but would enjoy herself just the same. Now she was at home. There was no one to shock, here—she had sung her best, looked her handsomest, laughed her loudest, and been only yet the more applauded for so doing. But she looked again at Mr. Thompson ; it was much the same look,

only brighter, happier, that Temple Masters had sometimes seen thrown at Audley Dale, and Mr. Thompson, though a much cleverer man than that unfortunate young officer, was evidently flattered by it.

“She’ll come on again in the after-piece,” he said, “along with Eastern. I thought you’d be taken with her. I was this morning when she came, though I was confoundedly busy. She wants a separation on the grounds of cruelty, and, she fears, insanity. I was to hear it all to-morrow. But I fancy you have told me enough. I don’t think she’ll require a separation, and you won’t have the honour of winning an acquittal for Mr. Audley Dale.”

“There will still remain the mystery of that unhappy creature who was really found in the Fort?”

“They won’t impute *her* death to Mr. Dale. And I dare say Mrs. Thornton can

tell us something of the manner in which that poor creature became possessed of her dress and cloak. It might be only an exchange of garments, such as is often practised on the stage. But keep well back when she comes on again—you may alarm her and spoil her playing, and I should like her to stand well with Eastern. He may be of use to her.”

“She’ll never persist in this career now!”

“It’s the only one she’s fit for. And she’ll never go back to her husband—I saw quite enough of her this morning to feel sure of that.”

The after-piece was but a short one, and the whole burthen of it fell upon Mr. Eastern and his coadjutrix. Again she took her full share of the honours of the evening, and the curtain fell upon her flushed with triumph and radiant with success. “Not quite the woman for a quiet parsonage,” said Mr. Thompson as they rose to go. “Do you think you’ll ever get her

back to it after this, and the chance of the London boards before her? But come along—Mrs. Harrup will be waiting supper. Did you take much notice of her?—the stout comfortable party who played the mamma? I should think supper with that woman was worth eating.”

They left the theatre, found their way through the carriages which almost blocked up the narrow street, and, after a few minutes' walk, were at the manager's abode. It was a private house, and he occupied the upper part of it. It was respectable, but could pretend to nothing more, and a very small servant ushered them into the sitting-room on the first floor.

The table was spread, and Mrs. Harrup awaiting them. Mr. Thompson had to introduce himself—he had not yet had an opportunity of making the lady's acquaintance, and was there only by his client's invitation—and then to introduce his friend,

and apologize for having brought him. Whether Mrs. Harrup approved of the addition or not, she welcomed him cordially ; perhaps as a matter of policy. Mr. Thompson was too important a person for new comers in their position not to wish to propitiate him.

She was a pleasant, good-tempered looking woman, in Temple Masters' opinion, with, in private life, very little of her profession about her, and there was nothing in the room to remind any one of the avocation of those who inhabited it. The glass, and plated articles on the table were bright, the cloth was clean ; and, though the apartments had been taken furnished, Mrs. Harrup had contrived to throw an air of home and comfort about them, which her niece had never succeeded in doing in the Rectory.

"Hilda will be home soon with her uncle," she observed, and then for the first

time Mr. Masters was aware of Mrs. Thornton's relationship to the lady before him. Was it real or only assumed to give her position more security? No, he believed in it—such a connection would account for a great many things which had puzzled him in Mrs. Thornton. He was amazed by her having appropriated the name of her husband's Rectory. "If poor Thornton only knew the use to which she has put the one souvenir she has carried from her home," he thought, as he sank into the very comfortable easy chair into which Mrs. Harrup had inducted him.

She would have comfortable chairs wherever she went, just as she would have nice little suppers. Her husband had not prospered, in a pecuniary sense, since his marriage, but he had never before been so well cared for. She carried home with her wherever she went, and worked as hard off the stage as on it. Henrietta Thornton,

since her sojourn with her relatives, had, for the first time for years, experienced something like happiness. Looking round on the home-like room, on the beaming matron who presided over it, and remembering the success of the evening, Mr. Masters began to think it was very doubtful indeed, whether she would give up all this to return to a husband, and that dull grey home overlooking the churchyard.

Presently there was a rustling up the stairs, a fluttering outside, and Mrs. Thornton entered, looking very bright even in her waterproof and a black hat with a scarlet feather. She had changed her dress, but not washed off all her *rouge*. There was enough left to enhance the brilliancy of her eyes. She went up smiling with hand extended to Mr. Thompson ; then, as he indicated his friend, prepared to curtsy with due dignity, and then, recog-

nising Temple Masters, drew herself up with a little cry.

“I won’t go back !” she said ; “if you’ve come to fetch me ! I—I won’t go back,” and then she began to cry almost hysterically ; and she was one of those women to whom tears are almost as strange as they are to men. But Temple Masters, remembering how she had parted with her husband, was not astonished at them.

Mr. Harrup now came in. He had stayed outside to take off his boots and outer coat. He was a bluff, red-faced, large man, who took low comedy and jovial farmers ; he went up to his niece, and looked menacingly at Mr. Masters. He might have looked less threateningly had not the lady distinguished herself so well that evening. Temple Masters thought it best to avert the rising storm at once.

“Mrs. Thornton,” he said, “I haven’t come to take you back. Mr. Thornton

does n't know that I'm here. He is incapable of knowing anything, being on a sick bed, from which it is very doubtful if he'll ever rise. Only, I want to appeal to you on behalf of my friend, Audley Dale, who is now in Wearmouth jail under the imputation of your murder. I think I must trouble you to appear once more in your real character and clear him."

Mrs. Thornton gave a little scream. "I've seen nothing of it! Heard nothing of it! Has it been in the papers? But there, I never look at them! Good gracious, Mr. Masters, tell me all about it."

"I've advertised for you in the *Times* and in the *Telegraph*, and an account of the inquest has appeared in both within the last three days."

"Ah! I've been studying my part and practising three hours a day, besides making-up my dresses. You don't know what an actress's life is, Mr. Masters; but you

must have seen something of it all, Mr. Harrup," she said, turning reproachfully to that gentleman.

"Yes, I have—I don't deny it, ma'am. I meant to have acquainted you with what had taken place when Mr. Eastern had gone. But I could n't run the risk of your turning nervous and throwing up your part, which you certainly would have done, if I'd let you know anything of this sooner. You've not been long enough on the stage yet to know how to keep your private feelings in subordination to your professional interests."

Mrs. Thornton had recovered herself sufficiently during this speech to take off her hat and cloak, and to display herself in a very neatly made, well-fitting dress. Mrs. Harrup now observed, "It seems unkind to speak of it, but the rabbits will be spoiled if we wait any longer, and, by the way they were getting on when I came in.

I should say they will be done to a turn by this ; and mashed potatoes *do* get so dry if they're kept long waiting."

"Don't let us keep supper waiting on any account, madam," said Temple Masters. "I'll acquaint Mrs. Thornton with everything when it's over. She will certainly look in the papers for the future, unless, in time, she gets weary of reading her own praises in them."

That little compliment set Mrs. Thornton quite at her ease. Flattery and praise were the very breath of her life, and she seemed to have been perishing for want of them while at St. Hilda. She drew up to the table, and in two or three minutes was eating her supper as heartily, and laughing over it as merrily, as if all her life had been as mere a comedy as that which she had been enacting on the stage.

The rabbits, smothered in onions, were, as Mrs. Harrup had expressed it, done to a

turn. The mashed potatoes were excellent. They had light ale at supper, which was good and clear ; afterwards whiskey and brandy were put on the table, and the water to mix them with was, what it rarely is in far more pretentious places, up to boiling point. They did n't talk about anything unpleasant all supper-time. It was tacitly understood that the meal was to be enjoyed, and nothing discussed which would militate against its enjoyment. Mrs. Thornton asked after Mrs. Rushington and after Milly very affectionately, but she made no allusion to her husband or even to Audley Dale. To have brought his name up would have brought up things which, while the rabbits and onions were about, would be best avoided. She laughed, chatted, and now and then dashed off into a bar of a song. Mr. Thompson paid her a great deal of attention, and she received it much as she had done similar attentions from Audley

Dale, only with more freedom and *abandon* in her manner. She was not on her good behaviour now. She was not, and, to all appearance, had forgotten that she ever was, the Rector's wife, but when the cloth was cleared, and the clean tumblers filled—Mrs. Thornton, like her aunt, evidently enjoying a modest potion of brandy and water—Temple Masters thought it well to recall her attention to that fact. Accordingly he gave her a brief recital of all that had taken place, which she heard with the liveliest interest, deepening into horror as he spoke of the poor creature who had been taken for her.

“Poor thing! poor thing!” she cried, and really shed a tear or two. Then she gave her own account of her flight, and to some extent cleared up the mystery surrounding her unhappy double. She had remained trembling with cold and fear at the furthest end of the den to which her

husband had conveyed her, afraid to move lest she should perish by his hand, and preparing to wait and meet her death through the incoming of the tide ; but at last she thought she heard him fall—she listened—spoke to him and received no answer. After a while she took courage, and, wading through the water, found her way at last to the stairs, and felt her husband extended on them. She went upwards, and was sure that he still lived, nay, that it was more than probable that the waters would subside before they reached the step on which his head rested—if, indeed, he did not recover first. She found her way out, dripping, cold, and shivering, and walked on, thinking at first only of one thing, to leave her husband as far behind as possible. She was possessed with an intense fear of him—so intense, that to escape from him was all she thought of. She believed at the time

that he was capable of following her, and carrying out his murderous intentions.

An idea possessed her that as long as he thought her living he would never rest till he had fulfilled his purpose. She would get away to her aunt, who she knew was at St. Bede's—her husband having taken the theatre on their return from America—and she would ask her to shelter and protect her. But there were immediate difficulties in the way. Not so much, money—luckily she had a few pounds in her purse—but if she found her way to a railway station they would not let her travel in her wet dress, and her appearance would excite remark and talk, which would lead to her husband's finding out her track and following it. In this dilemma what she thought a great piece of good fortune presented itself, in the shape of a woman of the tramp or pedlar class, but decently dressed for her station, and wearing a short

grey cloak, which Mrs. Thornton, trembling with cold, wanted greatly. Her stage experience suggested a resource. She went up to the woman, and asked her to change dresses, telling her that the tide had overtaken her, and wetted her through, giving her the gold keeper off her hand to induce her to make the exchange. She preferred this to money, as she had only sovereigns in her purse, and considered it might be better to part with the ring. The bargain was struck. Mrs. Thornton was soon clothed in a short print dress, grey cloak, and black straw bonnet ; and then she discovered that her gold chain must have given way, and that that and her watch had gone. She must have left them in the Fort. With the feeling of her own safety something of pity for her husband returned. This woman might help him if she went to look for the watch. She told her where she had dropped it, telling her she was

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him of the change of dress, and getting into the van, dried Mrs. Thornton's garments by the fire. They drove on till they were near Wearmouth ; then, as he was in the habit of doing, he turned the horses out to graze in a field, without asking the owner's leave, and his wife and he prepared to pass the night in the van. He went to bed early—the beer he had taken had made him sleepy—but after a while he woke, and found his wife still astir. He watched her with no particular motive at first, but at last her movements excited his curiosity. She put on the dress and hat which she had taken from the strange lady, and seemed amused by her own appearance in them. Then she looked towards the bed, as if to ascertain if he were really asleep, and as he pretended to be so, took a candle and some matches, and left the van. He was determined to follow her ; something was up between her and the

woman she had changed with,—she was going to make a little more by the transaction than she had told him, and he was resolved to assert his marital rights in pecuniary matters. He got up and followed her, and, to his surprise, she proceeded towards the Fort, entered it, and lighting an end of candle she had brought with her, disappeared behind the wall. The glimmering of her candle guided him to the aperture. He followed her stealthily, far enough down the stairs to watch her movements, and saw her searching with her candle on the ground. The tide had gone down, but had left pools in many places, and it was some time before she obtained the object of her search. It was something bright and glittering, a gold chain and watch, he thought, but could not be sure. Presently he saw her putting it on with evident satisfaction; then she came towards, and was about to pass, him. He

asked her for what she had, and she refused to give it up to him ; he had been drinking, and was in no humour to be trifled with. He insisted upon her giving him what she had found, and on her again refusing, struck her with the stick he held in his hand, and she fell. He had not intended to do her any serious injury—he had given her many a blow before, but none so heavy as this. He was surprised when she did not move—he shook her roughly, and told her not to sulk. No answer came, and he was frightened. Had he killed her, or was she shamming? He hardly dared hope the last, but thought it best to get away, and await the result at home. When the morning broke, and his wife did not appear, he put his horses in the van, and went his way, putting as many miles as he could between himself and the Fort. He felt sorry for what he had done. He had not meant to hit so hard, and now that he was

to suffer for his share in an attack on a gamekeeper, he thought he might as well make a clean breast of a crime which had weighed more heavily on his conscience than most others he had committed.

Mrs. Thornton would not return to her home. Anything but that. She left it to Temple Masters to take what steps he thought best to prove her identity, in order to clear Audley Dale, but back to the Rectory she would not go. She was not implacable against her husband, speaking of him with a kind of pity, as one who was not responsible for his actions, but that, evidently, made her dread and horror of him all the greater. And a return to her former life would, she said, be equally impossible. "How I bore it so long I can't tell, but I did my best, and didn't get on. It has done one thing for me; nursed my voice round, and given me my strength back again, so that I can see my

way now to getting on in the career for which I am most fitted, at last. Besides, I've engaged myself to Mr. Harrup for the next six months; he has taken the theatre here on the strength of my playing the leading parts, and after his giving me a home when I was homeless, shelter and help when I needed them the most, I should be almost as false as my husband thought me, if I were to leave him now."

Temple Masters thought she was in the right. At any rate, let her remain where she was, till her husband was convinced of her innocence. In his present state, the very sight of her face might prove dangerous. He went back the next day to Wearmouth, and his first visit was to St. Hilda Rectory. Clare came down stairs to meet him.

"Sinking fast!" she said, with a little irrepressible triumph in her tones. "He can't last till the morning, Mr. Harben says."

Temple Masters understood her. Whatever Harold Thornton had to tell could never be told again. He was sorry for this poor weak misguided saint, who had made so terrible a mistake, and was paying so great a penalty for the doing so. But he could not repress the triumphing in his tone. "I am sorry for it," he said gravely. "I should have liked to have told him that I had seen Mrs. Thornton this morning, and left her well and happy. We shall have Mr. Dale at large by this time to-morrow."

Clare turned paler than he had ever seen her; then went up, feeling that she was conquered at last, and sat down by the bedside where her dying master lay, to await the end, and speculate upon her future.

Three days after, Audley Dale was sunning himself in Mrs. Rushington's morning room. That lady had quite taken him back into her good graces, and was satisfied that

a match with a Bishop's second son, and an Earl's nephew, was everything that she could desire for her daughter. Mrs. Thornton is making headway fast in her profession ; she owes something to the sea-breezes and the quiet life at Wearmouth. They have given her a sounder chest and better lungs than she had ever had before. Charlotte Clare has found a situation as useful companion to an invalid lady. She is considered as trustworthy and honest in the highest degree, and there is no doubt but that she will have a handsome legacy at her mistress's death.

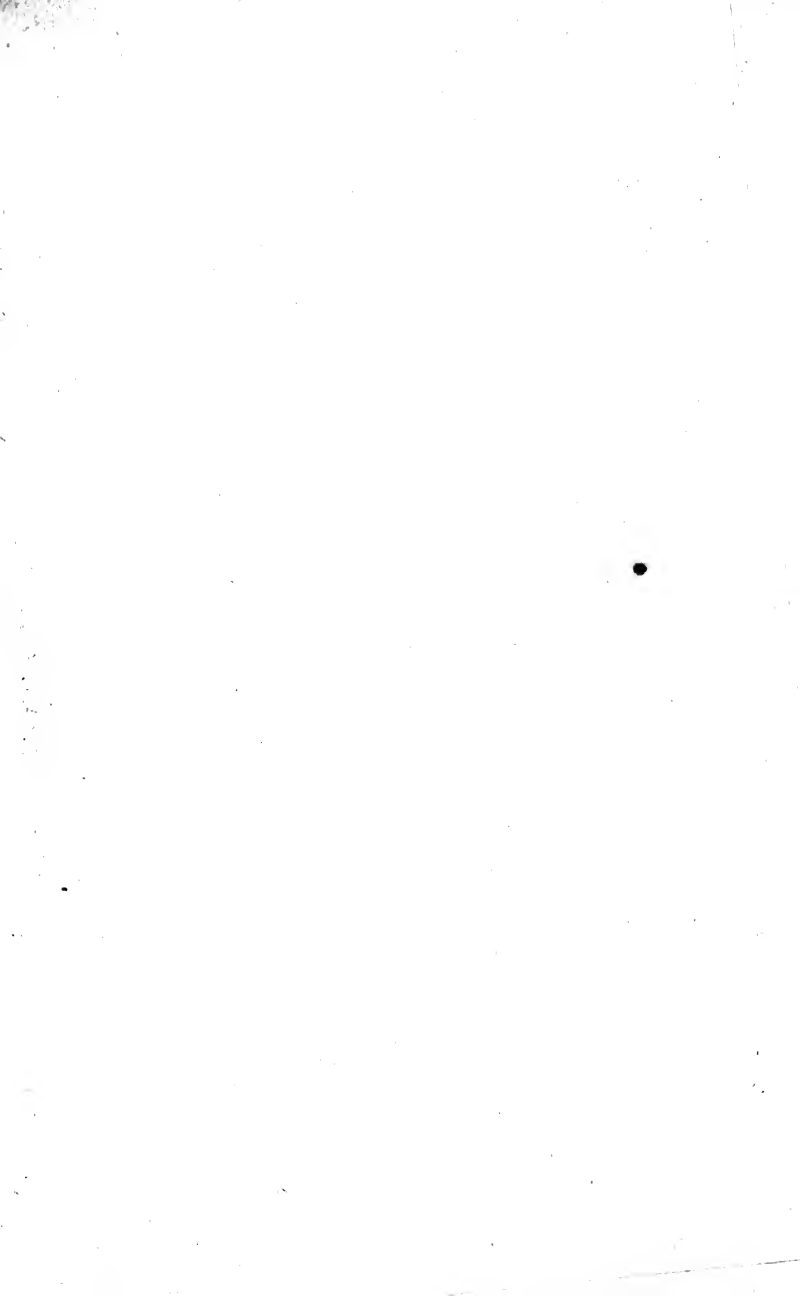
Beatey Layton and Mr. Temple Masters are about to commence housekeeping, but it is not likely to be in a garret. On the whole, Beatey's papa and mamma think they have as much reason as Mrs. Rushington to be satisfied with their daughter's prospects.

And Harold Thornton has gone before

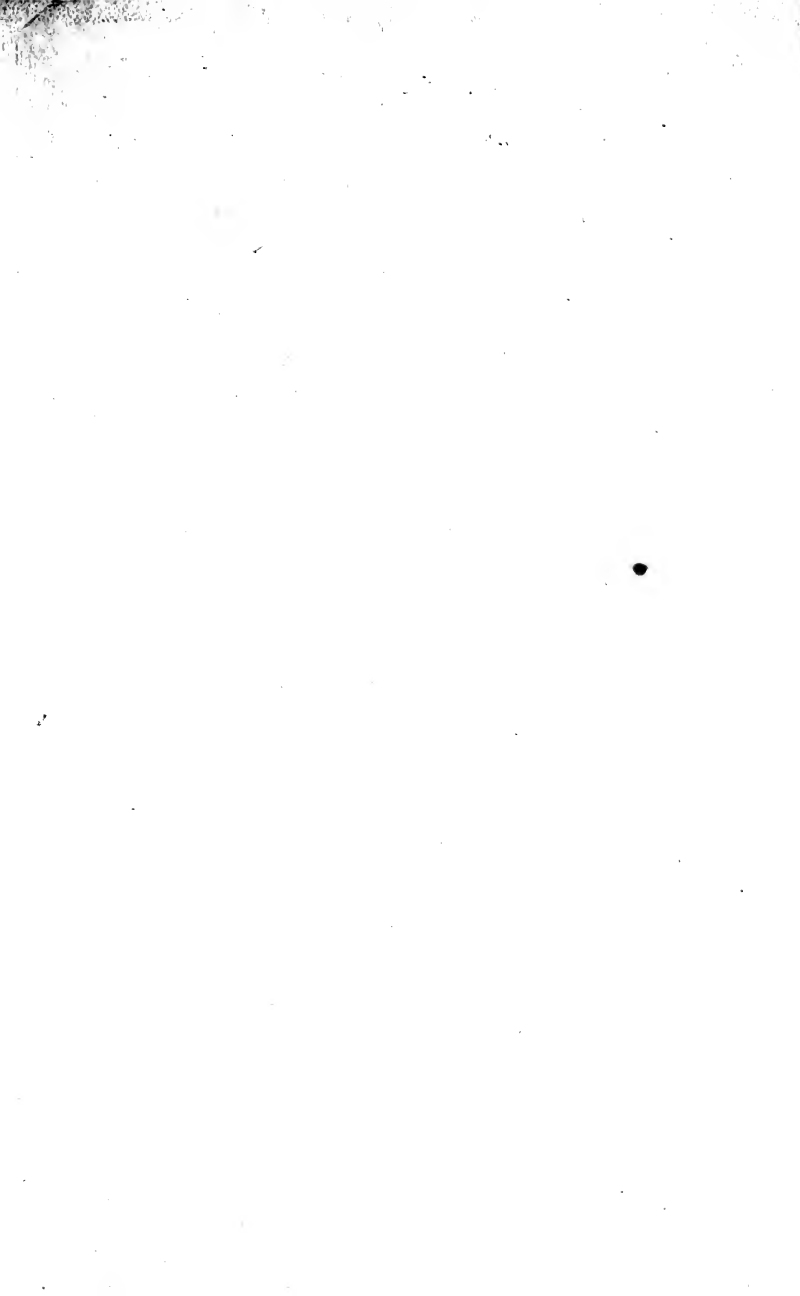
the One who alone may rightly judge him, and the One who alone can tell how far condemnation should be given or pardon accorded to the one sin of a good man's life.

THE END.









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